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The Best Value in the World

The man who held the horse bearing a map of the U. S. in his pinto markings fired again. Ole sprawled in the ranch yard.

Riding across the vega that crisp fall morning, Emmet Morse swore at the errand that carried him away from his work. Old Crusty Abe Pennick had laid out plenty of riding for the day, before he left for town. This business of carrying a quarter of beef over to Swansons was a nuisance. A damn' funny thing he mused, that Abe Pennick, known all through the Mule Hill country as a hard boiled old so and such, should send beef to a nester. A nester who had squatted smack in the middle of his best hay land, fenced off a section, and was proving up on it. A *damn'* funny thing!

Of course, and here Emmet grinned to himself, Abe might be a little bit overrated in crustiness. Emmet had worked for the old man for four years and had seen several things that indicated Abe wasn't as hard boiled as he was supposed to be. Still, for a ranchman to send beef to a Swede nester was a little unusual.

Emmet pushed the burlap-wrapped quarter away from his leg, and clear of the butt of the fifteen-inch barreled thirty-thirty that was under his right fender. He gigged Blaze, his big bay horse, gently with his spurs and swore a little more. Beef is mighty unhandy to carry on a saddle.

Emmet struck the fence that Swanson had put up around the section, and headed his horse along it. Swanson had put a gate clear at the far end, making an extra mile to travel. Just another inconvenience. A fine way to waste a morning! Butcher a yearling, hang the hide on the corral fence and then carry a front quarter nine miles.

Emmet saw a horse and rider converging on the far fence corner and promptly forgot his grievances. It had turned out to be a swell morning after all. The rider was Valorie Ulrick, the girl who taught in the Shadow Creek school house. Evidently she was headed for Swan-

TRAIL OF THE CROOKED NECK CALF

COMPLETE NOVEL

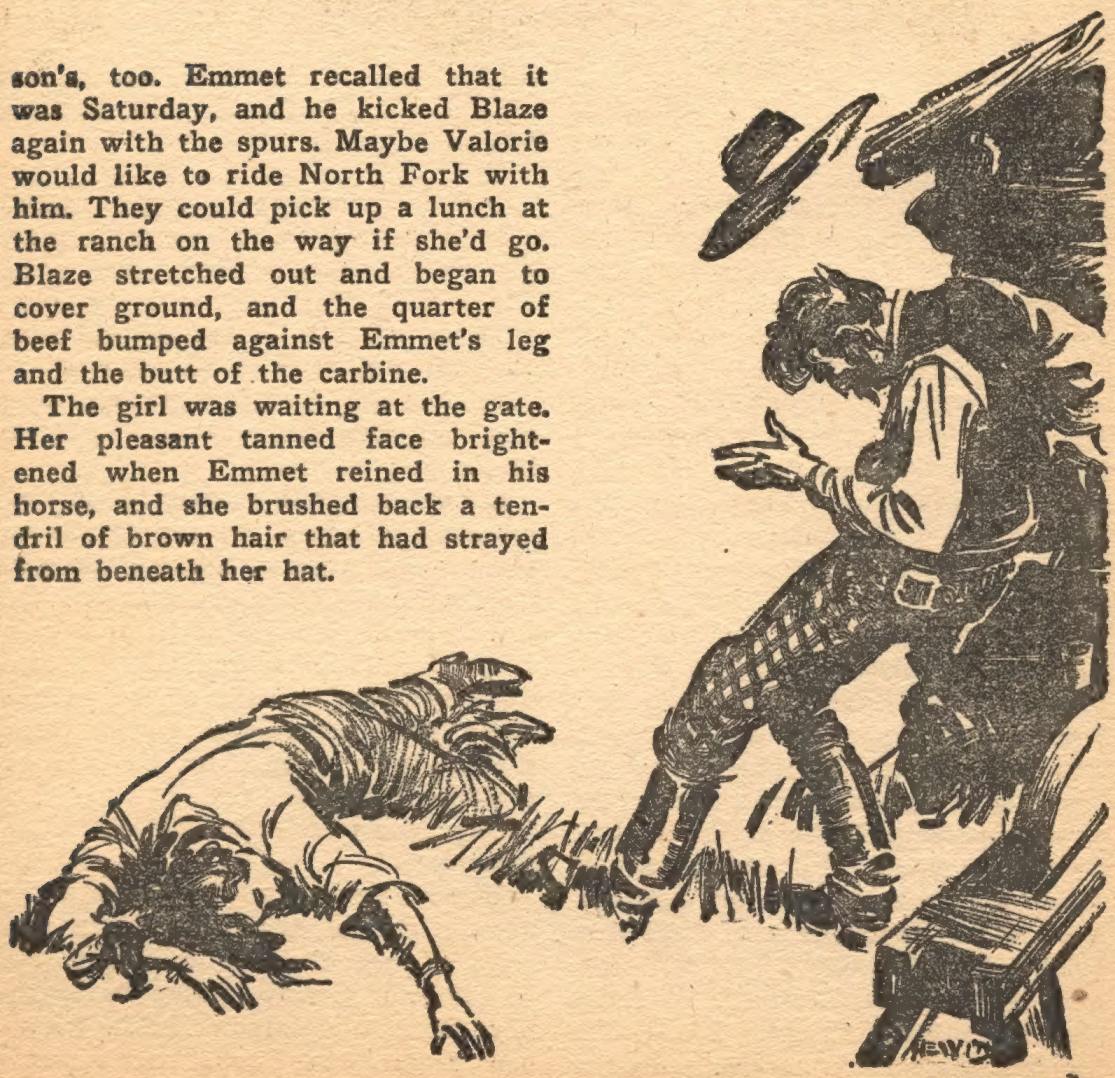
By

BENNETT FOSTER

The Trail Of The Crooked Neck Calf Forked Two Ways— One To Gunsmoke, One To Glory

son's, too. Emmet recalled that it was Saturday, and he kicked Blaze again with the spurs. Maybe Valorie would like to ride North Fork with him. They could pick up a lunch at the ranch on the way if she'd go. Blaze stretched out and began to cover ground, and the quarter of beef bumped against Emmet's leg and the butt of the carbine.

The girl was waiting at the gate. Her pleasant tanned face brightened when Emmet reined in his horse, and she brushed back a tendril of brown hair that had strayed from beneath her hat.



"Hello, cowboy," she greeted him. "Going to open the gate for me?"

Emmet, a grin on his square jawed, homely face, doffed his Stetson. "Good mornin', lady," he answered the greeting. "If you're goin' my way I'll open it for you."

"I'm going to Swanson's." The girl's brown eyes danced with mischief as they always did when Emmet was near. "If that's your destination. . . ."

"I'm packin' a quarter of beef to the Swede's." Emmet had dismounted and was busy with the wire. He knew that Valorie didn't like to have him call Swanson a Swede. It always got a rise out of her. "You goin' up to stay for dinner?"

"No!" Valorie gave the expected response. "How often do I have to tell you not to call your neighbor a Swede? We're all Americans in this country."

"Some more'n others." The horses were through the gate and Emmet was replacing the wire. "Now you take an Injun. There's an American for you! If you want to be a real American, just hook up with a big buck. What you goin' to do this afternoon?"

"None of your business!" Merriment still danced in the girl's eyes. This was an old and oft repeated argument. "The idea of your suggesting that I marry an Indian! I'm surprised at you, Emmet Morse!"

"You ain't a darn' bit surprised." Emmet caught a stirrup and mounted Blaze. "You knew I was goin' to say that. Honest, Valorie, what are you goin' to be doin' this afternoon? I got to ride the upper end of North Fork. I thought mebbe we could pick up a lunch at the ranch an' you'd go 'long. There ain't no work to do up there. The Old Man just wants me to ride fence an' bog, an' we could have a picnic at the fence. Will yuh go?"

"I don't know, Emmet." The girl shook her head. "Maybe I can. I'm going to Swanson's now to see what happened to Little Ole. He hasn't been in school for three days. I'll tell you before you start back."

"Yuh better go," grinned Emmet. "Come on. Let's go see what's the matter with the Swede's offspring."

Valorie laughed and sent her horse ahead. "I'll think about it," she promised again.

The wagon trail they followed twisted sharply to avoid a bog. A quarter of a mile away Eighty Eight mountain's long spur pushed down into the flat. Filled with the sheer exuberance of living, the two, man and woman, sent their horses along at a trot.

Ole Swanson, the nester, had built his cabin just at the foot of the mountain. There was a spring there and logs could be had from the hillside. Emmet Morse and Valorie Ulrick rode into the fenced yard through the open gate, stopped and dismounted.

"I'll take this beef around to the meat safe," announced Emmet. "You go on in an' get yore visit over. We got to ride quite a piece yet."

"I haven't said I was going," protested the girl. "I don't know . . ."

"You'll go, though," grinned Emmet, untying the quarter. "I'll be inside in a minute."

Shouldering the quarter he started around the house. At the corner he paused and grinned back at the girl by the horses. Then he rounded the log corner, and instantly the grin was erased from his face. Two bodies were lying at the far corner of the cabin, just where Swanson had built a little back stoop. One, covered by a white night shirt, had a bearded face turned to the sky. That was Ole Swanson.

Emmet knew that the other body, despite the man's clothing that covered it, was that of a woman. He needed no second look to identify her. Emmet had seen Hulda Swanson dressed in Levi's and a man's

shirt too often to have any doubts. The quarter of beef struck the ground with a thud. "My God!" Emmet gasped softly, stepped back to the cabin corner and spoke, his voice a rasp.

"Stay with the horses, Valorie!" he commanded. "Don't go in or come back here! Somethin's happened!"

He did not stop to see that the girl obeyed him, but ran back around the corner of the cabin. He was bending over the bodies when he heard a gasp behind him. Valorie Ulrick followed in spite of his command. Emmet looked up at the girl, his face grim.

"You would come!" he said.

"They—they—" gasped the girl.

"They been shot, both of 'em." Emmet's voice was harsh. "Somebody up on the mountain done the business for 'em."

"But—" began the girl again.

"I don't know who or why or how," snapped Emmet.

"But where is little Ole? I don't see him. Do you think—?"

"I don't know what to think," grated Emmet. "We'll look around for the kid. Hell! This happened this mornin'. They ain't hardly cold."

He straightened up from his crouch beside the bodies and stared down at them. Harsh lines had sprung into being on his cheeks, and his eyes were bleak. "I'll get a tarp an' cover 'em," he said, speaking more to himself than to his companion. "Then I'll get the sheriff. This here is—" He broke off and started back toward the log barn and the shed beside it.

The girl followed him, not wanting to be left alone with those still bodies. There was no tarp in the shed and Emmet entered the barn, Valorie still at his side. The barn was empty and dark. Emmet had pulled a big square of canvas from the side of a stall and turned back toward the door when a muffled sound came from the hall. He stepped quickly around the end, looked in, and then took a long step forward.

"The kid," he said.

There was a small prone body in the long manger. Valorie stepped past Emmet, gathered the slight body in her arms. The boy was sobbing and his flaxen head bobbed convulsively in the hollow of the girl's shoulder. Emmet shook his head at Valorie, lifted the tarp and stepped outside the door, the girl and her weeping burden remaining in the barn. Presently Emmet returned and nodded as the girl's eyebrows went up in interrogation.

"Covered," said Emmet softly. "We'll take him to town. We got to . . ."

Valorie, carrying the boy, moved past him.

She went around the house, carefully taking the side away from the stoop. When she reached the horses she stopped. Emmet had not followed. Presently he appeared, a scowl on his face.

"It's nineteen miles to town," he said.

"I'll take Ole to the teacherage," answered the girl. "Will you carry him or shall I?"

Emmet swung Blaze around, caught a stirrup and went up. "I'll take the kid," he said sharply. "Come on. I want to get Tawson out here right away."

The girl, with an effort, passed the boy up to Emmet. Little Ole was limp, inert, the only sign that he lived being in the long, convulsive breaths. Relieved of her burden she mounted her own horse. Emmet cradled the boy against his chest.

"Come on," he said again.

They could not move faster than a walk. Twice Emmet shifted the small body from one arm to the other. His face, bleak and harsh, forbade questioning. Valorie, once

or twice, made an attempt to talk, but the answers that came were so short that she remained silent thereafter. It took them an hour to cover the six miles to the little white painted school and small cottage that sat beside Shadow Creek. Just as they reached it, Emmet spoke.

"I took that quarter to the meat safe," he said slowly. "There was a whole beef, fresh butchered, in the safe. There was a hide on the corral fence, a steer hide. It was branded AP."

"What—?" began Valorie.

"I don't know," Emmet returned in a tired voice. "You keep the kid, Valorie. I'm goin' in to town."

The girl dismounted beside the fence bounding the school and teacherage. Emmet handed the boy down to her, then without another word or a backward glance, he set spurs to Blaze and swung away at a long lope toward Upton.

The hours passed slowly to the girl left alone in the little white cottage that served as her home for nine months each year. Her efforts to get little Ole to talk brought only broken sobs. Presently under the spell of a familiar voice that he loved and obeyed, a garbled story came, mingling with the weeping. Valorie Ulrick listened, her face white with horror. When the boy finished the tale, she barred and bolted the doors and drew the shades over the windows. She sat by the boy, comforting him. Shock had its way. Reassured and safe, little Ole drifted off into a sort of coma, not a true sleep. Companionless now, the girl busied herself about her little domain. She peered out the window from time to time, searching the road west for signs of Emmet and the sheriff. She built a little fire in the stove and, because she loved Emmet Morse and because she must do something with her hands, she prepared a meal.

As she worked the deviltry of the crime drove all thoughts of mercy from her mind. Someone must pay!

CHAPTER II

MURDER VERDICT

Some three hours after she had reached the school, she heard horses on the road. A peep through the window reassured her and she opened the door. Emmet Morse, Art Tawson, the sheriff, and two others were riing up to the fence. As the four men dismounted and approached the cottage, Valorie recognized the other two. They were Charlie Davis, Tawson's chief deputy, and Frank McCray, a ranchman from the south of Shadow Creek. The girl met them at the door.

Tawson, a burly, gray mustached man with the indelible stamp of peace officer heavy upon him, shook hands with the girl, seated himself and began to ask questions. His drawling voice soothed her tired nerves and she answered freely. Everyone in the Mule Hill country liked Art Tawson. He was a good, square officer.

Valorie told of meeting Emmet at the gate to Swanson's section, of the discovery of the bodies and of little Ole. The sheriff rose from his chair and walked over to the couch where the boy lay. For a moment he stood looking down at him, then he grunted under his breath and reseated himself.

"Pore little kid," he said. "Did you get him to talk any, Miss Valorie?"

Valorie Ulrick drew a long breath and nodded. "He talked to me," she answered. "I'll tell you what he said. I don't think he ought to be questioned right now."

Tawson nodded. "Go ahead," he said. "We won't bother the kid for awhile."

"Ole's father had been ill." The girl spoke slowly, her eyes on the sheriff's face. "His mother had been doing the work around the place and Ole was staying home from school to help her. He said that this morning his father was in bed. Little Ole had

just gone out after the milk cow, which was up on the point, north and west of the house. He was bringing the cow in when he heard a rifle. He looked down at the house and saw his mother lying right in front of the stoop. Ole said has father ran out in his night shirt. He saw his father stop on the stoop for an instant, then he heard the rifle again and . . . Oh . . ."

"Now, Miss Valorie," Tawson's voice was kind, "take yore time."

Valorie regained her composure with an effort. "I'll try," she said. "But thinking of that poor little fellow—"

"Did he tell you anythin' else?" questioned Tawson.

"Ole was up above the house," the girl resumed her recital. "After he saw his father fall he looked up the hill. He says he saw a horse up there, a big brown and white horse. He says that there was a map 'just like the one we have at school,' on the horse's side. There is a big map of the United States on our blackboard at school. Little Ole meant that. He ran down the hill and went to his father and mother. They were—they were just lying there. Then he says that he ran to the barn and hid. We found him in the manger." Valorie's recital ceased.

The men were looking at each other. "A map, huh?" drawled Tawson. "Map of the United States. What time did Abe leave the ranch this mornin', Emmet?"

Emmet's face was wooden, his voice flat and emotionless. "Early," he answered. "About six o'clock. I was gettin' ready to butcher an' Al Root was goin' over to the west wells."

"What horse was Abe ridin'?" questioned Tawson.

The answer came after a perceptible pause. "Old U. S."

There was silence for a moment, broken by McCray. "Abe Pennick come to town about eleven-thirty," he stated flatly.

Tawson said, "Hmmm," under his breath.

Charlie Davis made a slow statement. "Old U. S. is the only horse in this country that's a paint with the map of the United States on his side." The words fell flatly on the group.

"An' he left at six," said Tawson. "Sure of that, Emmet?"

"About six," Emmet wrenched the words out.

"An' you said that there was a fresh hide on the fence an' meat in the meat safe?" Tawson's drawl told nothing of his thoughts.

"An AP hide," Emmet agreed soberly.

Art Tawson got up. "I reckon you better go back to town, Charlie," he said to his deputy. "Old Crusty's still there. You better pick him up. We'll go on out an' see things, an' then get a coroner's jury tonight or tomorrow. The Swede had a wagon, didn't he, Emmet?"

Emmet nodded.

"Thanks, Miss Valorie," Tawson nodded to the girl. "I reckon you'll want to keep little Ole?"

"I'll keep him here," answered the girl.

"Then we'll ride on." The sheriff moved toward the door. "Emmet, I'd take it kindly if you'd ride with us. I don't suspicion you, you understand, but you work for the AP an'—"

"I'll go with you," said Emmet woodenly. Avoiding the girl's eyes he followed the sheriff out of the cottage.

Emmet Morse did not talk with Valorie Ulrick for three days. During that time he saw her only once, when she testified at the coroner's inquest held upon the bodies of Olaf and Hulda Swanson. The verdict, brought in by six sober-faced men who sat as a jury at that inquest, was not one to surprise. Those six grim-faced jurymen announced that,

in their opinion formed upon the evidence given, Ole Swanson and his wife had come to their death at the hands of Abraham Pennick.

At a preliminary hearing before a justice court, Pennick's bail was set at fifteen thousand dollars, a sum that neither he nor any of his acquaintances could hope to raise. Therefore, the old man sat in a cell in the little courthouse jail in Upton and the affairs of the AP settled upon the shoulders of Emmet Morse and Al Root, the only other remaining AP hand.

There had been two men holding down an AP line camp on the east side of Eighty Eight mountain, but these two, because of the high feeling which ran against Pennick, and also because they were young and unsettled, quit their jobs. Strangely enough, for Root had worked for the AP for several years before Emmet had joined the spread, Abe Pennick placed the management of the AP in Emmet's hands.

Emmet talked to the old man in jail. Pennick appeared to be stunned. His white, bushy eyebrows shadowed puzzled blue eyes and his old voice, generally harsh and imperious, was wavering as he protested his innocence to Emmet.

"I rode along the edge of the vega that mornin'," he told Emmet. "It took me a while an' I never got to town early. I was ridin' U. S., like they said, but I never done any shootin'. Why hell, Emmet! I wouldn't shoot no woman. Not even by mistake. I liked Swanson. Why I never fought him even when he cut square into the middle of my hay pasture."

Emmet reassured the old man. He felt the change in Pennick, saw it in the shrunken cheeks, the drooping white mustache, the watering blue eyes. "Sure you didn't," he said. "You'll come out of this all right." And Abe Pennick, "Old Crusty," reassured and taking strength from the younger man, went back to his cot and sat down. When Emmet left the jail the old man was still sitting there.

Emmet met Valorie in Sol Rosenblatt's general store. The girl was at a counter buying supplies when Emmet came in and she waited, frankly anxious, until he came up to her. When the tall young fellow stopped by her side, she put her hand on his arm.

"I want to talk with you, Emmet," she said. "Is there some place where we can go?"

"Back by Sol's office," answered Emmet soberly. "I want to talk to you, too, Valorie."

The girl preceded him to the rear of the store. There, beside the glassed in cubby hole that served the proprietor for an office, they stopped.

"I haven't seen you, Emmet," began Valorie, nervously. "I wondered if there was something wrong."

Emmet shook his head. "Nothin' wrong between you an' me," he answered. "What made you think that, girl?"

"The inquest," Valorie ventured. "I testified—"

"You told nothin' but the truth, Honey," Emmet told her. "You couldn't do otherwise. I worked for Abe Pennick an' I'm a AP hand, but that don't cut any ice between you an' me."

Valorie's face plainly showed her relief. "Have you talked with Mr. Pennick?" she asked. "What does he say?"

"He says he never done it," answered Emmet. "He says that he wasn't mixed up in it at all. Somehow, Valorie, I believe him."

The girl nodded, and Emmet, hardly aware of her nod, continued. "It looks plenty bad," he said. "There was the kid seein' that U. S. horse. There was the steer hide on the fence an' the fresh beef inside. There was motive enough without Swan-

son rustlin'. Hell! If he did do it, I don't blame the old man. He'd been crowded enough. Swanson took a section of his best hay land. He was rustlin', too. The hide an' the beef show that. Suppose you was a cowman an' come up on a feller in those circumstances. What would you do? That woman was dressed like a man. She was shot by mistake. The thing I can't understand is, if the old man done it, why he just don't come out an' say so. They wouldn't hardly hang a man for shootin' a rustler in this country."

"Then you think Abe Pennick did do it?" questioned Valorie.

"The evidence says he did." Emmet spoke shortly. "I don't believe it, though. Somehow I just can't believe it!"

"If Swanson was rustling would he hang the hide of a stolen animal on his corral fence?" The girl spoke musingly. "I knew the Swansons, Emmet. I don't believe . . ."

Emmet's eyes were sharp as he scanned the girl's face. His forehead puckered. "Swanson was a dumb Swede," he said slowly. "Still—Shucks! He wasn't *that* dumb!"

Valorie drew closer to the man. "I've heard some talk," she said. "I heard things that you don't hear. I heard that George Swerer said the whole thing was a plant. That the fresh beef and the hide were put where they were to give Pennick an excuse. That the Swansons were killed because they had squatted in the vega."

"George Swerer said that?" questioned Emmet slowly.

"That's what I heard."

"Then how come Abe to tell me to take that beef over? Why—" Emmet stopped short.

Sol Rosenblatt, little, spare, jerky in movement, was coming down the aisle with short, rapid steps.

The little merchant greeted the two by his office with a quick, bird-like nod. "Miss Valorie," he said, "I am happy to see you. How are you?"

"I'm all right, Uncle Sol," answered Valorie. Everyone in the Mule Hills country knew Sol Rosenblatt and most people liked him. He was "Uncle Sol" to all the children of the country.

"Will you excuse this big bummer, Miss Valorie?" requested Rosenblatt. "I got words to talk to him."

"Why certainly, Uncle Sol," Valorie answered. "Are you going to the ranch, Emmet?"

Emmet nodded. "As soon as I can," he told her.

"Ride by the school house," said the girl. "I'll forgive you for taking Emmet away, Uncle Sol. Good-by." She turned and walked down the aisle, Rosenblatt and Emmet following her with their eyes. When she had disappeared around a rack of slickers Sol Rosenblatt put his hand on Emmet's arm.

"There is one nice lady," he said with conviction. "Come into my office, Emmet."

Emmet followed the little merchant into the glass enclosure. Sol took a chair and Emmet seated himself on a tall stool. Rosenblatt came to the point of the interview at once.

"Did Abe kill those peoples, Emmet?" he snapped.

Emmet Morse shook his head slowly. "I don't know, Uncle Sol," he answered. "They got a mighty good case against him. He says he didn't though, an' somehow I believe the old man."

Sol Rosenblatt produced a cigar and put it in his mouth. He never smoked but there was seldom a time when he was not chewing a dry cigar.

"Me neither," he said decisively. "What you going to do about it, Emmet?"

Again Emmet shook his head. "I don't know," he answered. "I'm goin' to get him a lawyer, Archer I think. We had him at the justice trial. I'm goin' to scout around but

I'm damned if I know what will come of it, Uncle Sol."

Rosenblatt nodded his black head. "You get Archer," he agreed. "Archer is a good man. He owes me some money, but he is a good man. Now I got a piece of news for you. You know I am a director in the bank?"

All the country knew that Sol was a bank director and Emmet said, "Yes," with a half grin on his face.

Sol leaned forward in his chair. "This morning comes an attachment on Abe's account," he announced impressively. "You can't get no money from the bank."

"Why is that?" Emmet's voice was sharp.

"Because we can't pay it out over a attachment."

"Who attached the account?"

Again Sol leaned forward. "George Swerer," he said. "He claims that Abe owes him some money for those calves he bought last spring. He's got the money tied up hard and fast."

Emmet thought for a while, his face dark with a frown. Then he shrugged. "We'd better not tell Abe about it. It'd only give him more to worry about. I got a little money," he continued. "I was figurin' . . . I thought that mebbe . . ."

"It was you and Miss Valorie, no?" questioned Sol. "You keep your money, Emmet. Archer owes me and Abe's credit is good. You go see Archer and whatever you need you get here like always. I'm like you, Emmet. I don't believe that Abe done it."

"Thanks, Uncle Sol," Emmet smiled at the older man. "I'm glad you feel that way. You an' me are about the only ones that do feel that way. I reckon I'll go over an' see Archer. Al's out at the place by himself." He got down from the stool, and with a final smile at Sol Rosenblatt, clumped out of the office.

There was a weight of responsibility on Emmet's shoulders. He was just twenty-six years old and this was a problem that would have tried an older head than his. After he had seen Archer, the lawyer, and had talked with him for a time and made arrangements for Archer to draw up a power of attorney for Abe Pennick to sign, he got his horse and a little package he had left at Rosenblatt's. Slowly he rode out of town, taking the road that led east up Shadow Creek.

Riding along the creek road, keeping his horse steadily moving, Emmet thought things over. There was an agreement between Emmet and Valorie Ulrick. This was the last year that the girl was to teach. Emmet had his eye on a cabin site in the Mule Hills and he had something like a hundred head of cows bearing his own brand, a VM connected, running with the AP cattle. This business of Abe Pennick meant more to Emmet than it would to just an ordinary employee. The old man had been kind to him, disguising his kindness with harsh words and a crusty exterior. Emmet owed Abe Pennick a lot. Here was a chance perhaps to repay an obligation.

CHAPTER III

SHOT FROM DARKNESS

When he reached the Shadow Creek school house it was well toward dark. It was nine miles from the school house to the AP headquarters but Emmet knew that Valorie would expect him to stay for supper and ride on later. He wanted to talk with the girl. He respected her as a person, besides loving her as a woman. Valorie used the keen mind she possessed and Emmet felt that he needed her counsel. Valorie was waiting for him at the door. Behind the girl, his tow head peeping from behind her skirts, was little Ole Swanson.

Emmet went into the little two-roomed cottage that served as the teacherage, put his hat on the floor and his package beside it. He kissed

Valorie's heat-flushed face, grinned at Ole and took a big chair that was always his own special seat. There was some desultory conversation while the girl placed the supper on the table. The talk continued during the meal and both man and girl were careful to avoid any reference to the thing that was uppermost in their minds. The meal over, Emmet and Ole helped Valorie with the dishes and then the girl sent the small boy to bed on a cot in the kitchen.

Assured now of some measure of privacy, they returned to the other room, Emmet taking the big chair by the window and the girl seating herself on a footstool beside him.

"I'd like to talk this over with you, Emmet," she said.

"I'd like to hear you talk it out," Emmet replied.

The girl reached for a plate of candy and passed it to the man. Emmet took a piece and ate thoughtfully. "That's good candy," he said.

"It's black walnut fudge." Valorie took a piece of candy herself. "Mother sent me a sack of walnuts from Missouri. Look how black I got my hands hulling them." She displayed her small, stained palms.

Emmet grinned and patted one of those small hands. "You wanted to talk this out," he reminded.

"I do, Emmet. This whole thing doesn't seem right. There are angles that don't ring true. Why should Swanson steal a calf and butcher it when Mister Pennick was sending him meat? Why should he hang the hide on his corral fence? Why, if he was planning on killing a man, would Abe Pennick ride US? That is one horse that can be identified all through the country. I can't believe those things, Emmet."

"You got to look at the other side," Emmet told her soberly. "Suppose that Swanson wanted to butcher convenient to home, or suppose his wife done the butchering? She could, you know, an' Swanson had been sick. Naturally they'd butcher close to home where they had water an' conveniences. They could get rid of the hide later on.

"Suppose Abe just rode up on the ridge an' seen one of 'em at it. He wouldn't figure on killin' a man but he'd get mad. He had a rifle on his saddle like I carry one on mine. He always carried one, didn't like a six shooter. He might of just come untracked an' cut down, an' then when he seen what he'd done, shoot again when Ole run out. That was the first time Abe had sent beef over to the Swansons. He didn't make no habit of it. I tell you a smart lawyer —"

Glass crashed in the window. Something hit the back of Emmet's big chair with a dull, thunk. Like a flash Emmet threw himself forward, dragging the girl down to the floor with him. One broad hand reached up to the table and caught the lamp, bringing it down. Emmet cupped his hand and blew quickly and the room was left in darkness. Ole was crying in the kitchen. Outside, gravel rattled somewhere near the creek.

In the dark Emmet spoke grimly. "There it is!" he snapped. "Abe never done *that!*"

Valorie was trembling beside him. The girl had not screamed or made a sound, only the tremor of her body showed her fright. Emmet comforted her, gave her something to do. "Little Ole," he reminded. "He's scared to death, Honey, You better get to him."

"What are you going to do, Emmet?" There was a fierce insistence in Valorie's voice. "You're not going out there—"

"Got to get my carbine off my saddle. Don't worry, girl. I won't leave yuh." Again Emmet comforted the frightened Valorie. "You get to little Ole now an' stay down low."

He felt the girl move and heard her slip away toward the kitchen

door. Emmet himself, on hands and knees, crawled to the front door. Noiselessly he opened it and then, when the opening was wide enough, went through in one swift motion. Out in the moonlight Emmet gained his feet and ran to the fence. Blue, ears erect, was nervously pulling back on the reins which held him to a post. Emmet went over the fence, got to Blue and pulled his carbine from the saddle scabbard. The smooth walnut of the stock was reassuring as he levered in a shell.

Emmet was not a gun man. He carried a rifle on his saddle because in the hills there were bobcats, and there were coyotes on the flats. That short barreled thirty-thirty was his constant companion. He shot it by instinct, rather than aim, and constant use and pride of accomplishment had made him something of a wizard with the weapon. Where most men handled a heavy forty-five or forty-four Colt and placed their dependence on the big, slow-moving slug, Emmet trusted to his hand's racing on the lever of his Winchester.

Armed now, he cat-footed around the teacherage, seeking trace of the man who had shot through the window. He was curiously happy. That shot which had crashed the glass had also crashed through his last doubts. He knew now that Abe Pennick was innocent.

The full moon made it almost as light as day. There was no one about the cottage, the school or the outbuildings. Emmet, scouting in widening circles, reached the creek. No one there either. He went back to the cottage and called when he reached the fence.

"Nobody out here, Valorie."

The girl answered him and Emmet went on in. When the shades had been drawn he lit the lamp. Valorie had quieted little Ole and the child had gone back to sleep. Valorie's face was white but there was no fear in her eyes. She was a hand, Valorie Ulrick was, that would do to ride the river with. Emmet told her so. Not in words, but with his arm about her and a kiss on her lips.

"It's all right, honey," he told her. "I'm goin' to bunk right here in the big chair. I'll take it out in the kitchen with Ole."

Valorie demurred but Emmet insisted and had his way. They talked for a while, Emmet telling the girl that she'd have to get Mrs. Jacobs from town to come out and stay with her. Then when he had her pacified and calmed, he moved the big bullet-torn chair into the kitchen. He was there in that chair when morning broke.

While Valorie prepared breakfast Emmet scouted down the creek. He thought that the likeliest place to look for tracks and he was right. He found where a man had left a horse in some willows, and further on he found where a man had stood and fired a shot. There was a thirty-thirty shell near the tracks but that didn't tell a thing. Thirty-thirties were as common as mud on that range.

POINT L.
COLORADO.

When they'd eaten breakfast Emmet went on to the AP. He had to see Al Root and he had to ride into town again to see Archer. There were financial arrangements to make with Archer and the power of attorney to secure. Emmet kissed Valorie goodbye when little Ole wasn't looking, got Blue, and started for the AP. Valorie, he thought, would be all right during the day. There would be a dozen and a half youngsters at school and she would not be molested while they were about. By night Emmet planned to have Mrs. Jacobs out at the teacherage. Mrs. Jacobs was a fighter and a mighty competent woman.

It was nine miles to the AP but Emmet pushed Blue along, and made

it in an hour. When he rode into the ranch Al Root came out to meet him.

Root was a strange man. He wasn't big, his slight build standing only about five feet six inches. Emmet had never seen Al Root with a gun. As Emmet dropped down from Blue he met with a surprise. Root, his dark face absolutely blank under his graying hair, had not one but two big Colts strapped around his middle. The guns were in worn black leather holsters and sagged familiarly at his hips. Root asked a question as Emmet dismounted.

"Where you been?" he demanded.

"At the school house," Emmet answered.

Al didn't question him further and after a moment Emmet continued. He told what he had learned from Rosenblatt and from Archer, then he recounted the occurrence at the school house the previous night. Al heard him out without comment. When Emmet finished Root unloaded his own news.

"I rode the west line yesterday," he said. "Swerer is pushin' cattle over on us. I think he means to do it deliberate."

Emmet shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. "Yo're just imaginin' things, Al. We'll ride over there this mornin' an' look it over. I got to go to town again this afternoon."

Root shook his head. "You'll see that it don't look good," he announced. "We'll ride over there, though, if you say so. I'll go run in some horses."

It took Root half an hour to bring in the cavvy and they spent another half hour around the place before they left. Emmet resented the time spent. He wanted to get to town to see Mrs. Jacobs, and he wanted to talk again with Rosenblatt and Archer. Still with work to be done at the ranch the next hour found him riding west with Al Root.

When the two reached the border of the AP range Emmet began to realize that Al was right. There were more of George Swerer's Cross in a Box cattle bordering along the AP than was natural. The AP and the Cross in a Box were both out on the flats, west of North Fork. The AP was the more desirable place of the two but the Cross in a Box was the larger. Swerer had a big spread and hired about six hands all year around.

The two finished their ride about eleven o'clock, reaching the AP again at that time. "I guess yo're right, Al," Emmet agreed when he dismounted. "I'll see Swerer in town this afternoon and tell him about it."

Root said nothing but started to the corral with his horse. Half way there he stopped and spoke to Emmet. "I'll go to town with you this afternoon," he stated.

The two ate lunch at the AP and then, mounted on fresh horses, rode silently toward Upton. When they reached town, Al went over to the jail to see Pennick while Emmet hunted up Archer. He had his talk with the lawyer and got the power of attorney that Archer had had Pennick sign. When that was done, he went to Rosenblatt's store but Sol had gone out to a sheep camp and would not be back until late. Emmet, therefore, went to find Mrs. Jacobs.

When Emmet laid out the proposition to her she began to bustle about at once, packing clothing that she would need. Mrs. Jacobs liked Valorie and was more than willing to go out and stay with the girl. Emmet left her to pack and went back down town. He still had to see George Swerer, and he wanted also to go over to the jail to see Abe Pennick.

He arranged for a wagon for Mrs. Jacobs at the livery. Then learning that Swerer was in the Adobe Walls, he walked on down to the saloon. He was putting off his visit to Pennick until the last thing. It hurt

Emmet to see that imperious old man penned in like a caged animal.

Swerer was in the Adobe Walls saloon and when Emmet came in the big man called him over and invited him to have a drink. The stranger standing beside Swerer was introduced to Emmet as Clyde Paris. After a drink together, Emmet broached the subject of his errand.

"I'd like to talk to you a little, Mister Swerer," he said.

"Sure." Swerer nodded and led the way over to a table by the wall. Seating himself he gestured toward a chair. Emmet sat down.

"First I'd like to talk to you about that attachment," he announced. "Is there some way we can fix that up, Mister Swerer?"

Swerer waved a large hand. It was a pudgy hand and somehow it repelled Emmet. In fact, he didn't like anything about Swerer. The man was of a flashy type. He had come into the country and invested a little money in the Cross in a Box. Seemingly he had prospered. He dealt in land and cattle, and being a shrewd trader, did well.

"There's nothin' to worry about concerning that attachment," Swerer answered Emmet's question. "Bohannon looks after all my legal business here and he put that on without tellin' me anythin' about it. He just done it to protect me."

Emmet's blue eyes were narrowed. "I thought those calves were paid for," he mused. "Seems like Abe said somethin' about payin' you."

Swerer shook his head. "He still owes me," he announced.

Emmet rubbed his chin. "I don't doubt yore word," he drawled. "Still I can't get it out of my head that Abe said he'd paid you."

"Likely he meant to." Swerer smiled disarmingly. "He didn't, though. You look through his papers an' see if you can find a bill of sale or a check. You won't find 'em."

Emmet nodded. "I guess not if you say so," he said. "Now there's another thing, Mister Swerer. I rode over on the west line this mornin' and there's a lot of Cross in a Box stuff driftin' our way. We're short handed. Just Al Root an' me to 'tend to it all, an' I'd appreciate it a heap if you'd put a man over there to look after yore stuff."

"Why sure!" Swerer boomed his agreement. "Oh, Clyde!"

Paris, who had loitered near the bar, sauntered over.

"Clyde is foreman for me now," announced Swerer, glancing at Emmet. "Clyde, Emmet here says that there is a bunch of our cattle over against him. You put Shorty out there tomorrow to throw 'em back."

Paris, a singularly silent man, simply nodded and sat down at the table.

Emmet got up. "I'll go on then," he said. "Thanks, Mister Swerer. Glad to of met you, Paris."

As he started toward the door of the saloon Art Tawson came through. Emmet stopped to speak to the sheriff, drawing him aside, and almost on Tawson's heels, Al Root came through the door.

CHAPTER IV

SELF-DEFENSE

Root nodded to the sheriff and Emmet and moved on back toward the bar. He had reached the end of the bar when he stopped short. Emmet, glancing at his friend, could almost see the hair bristle on Al's neck. At the far end of the bar Paris had risen from the table and was moving forward. His closely set yellowish eyes fell on Root, and he, too, stopped short.

Along the bar, men, sensing something, moved hastily back and, Tawson, catching the tension, took a step past Emmet. The sheriff's movement was too late to avert disaster.

Root uttered one short, explosive word: "Paris!" and his hand shot down to his gun. The gun hung in the scabbard for an instant and

then came clear. But in that instant, Paris, moving with the speed of a striking snake, had stepped behind the far end of the bar, fired a shot. Then he crouched, only his thin, skull-like face visible at the bar end.

Root staggered, took a stumbling step and fell, his gun flying from his hand. Tawson caught Emmet's arm in an iron grasp and roared a command. Swerer, springing up from the table, jumped between Paris and the room. His big voice drowned out all other sound as he shouted.

"By God, that was self-defense if I ever seen it!"

Emmet had started toward Paris when Tawson caught him. Now he made another try. Al Root was on the floor, not dead, for Emmet could see his chest heave. Jerking the arm in Tawson's big hand Emmet tried to reach his friend.

"Al ain't dead!" He almost yelled the words in Tawson's ear. "Get a doctor, somebody!"

Tawson, sensing that for the time Emmet was concerned only with Root's condition and not with revenge on Paris, let go the AP rider's arm. Emmet half ran to Root's side. He saw Tawson stride past him toward Paris at the bar end, and then Emmet knelt beside the wounded man. Root was unconscious. He had been hard shot low in the abdomen and was bleeding freely. Emmet lifted his head. Charlie Gehring, the owner of the Adobe Walls, had circled the bar and was kneeling on Root's other side. His eyes met Emmet's and he spoke hoarsely.

"They gone for a doctor," he said.

Emmet bent over Al again. He was aware of men moving behind him but did not look up. Gehring got up from the floor. Emmet tried to lift Root's head. Root was limp, lifeless except for his breathing. The big slug that had gone through his middle had knocked all the senses out of him. Emmet felt a hand on his shoulder and turned. Two men, with one of the green shutters from the front window of the Adobe Walls, were behind Gehring.

"We got to take him to the doctor, Emmet," said Gehring.

Emmet got up. He helped Gehring and the others load Root on the shutter and accompanied the crude stretcher out of the Adobe Walls and down the street. At the corner they turned. Emmet looked back. There were blood splotches on the board sidewalk behind him. The men with the stretcher went on and presently turned into the low rambling house that served as home, office and hospital for Doctor Rossiter, the one physician of the community.

Rossiter was waiting for them. Within ten minutes Al Root was stretched out on a table, Rossiter bending over him. Emmet Morse, tense, watched the doctor at his work.

Al Root was on the operating table for two hours. At the end of that time Rossiter announced that he had done what he could. He shook his head morosely, answering the question in Emmet's eyes.

"Don't think there's much chance, Morse," he said gruffly. "All we can do is wait an' see."

"I'll stay an' watch him," offered Emmet.

"You'd just be in the way," Rossiter told him bluntly. "You come back before you go to the ranch. I'll know more then."

"But," began Emmet, "the ranch—"

Rossiter put his hand on Emmet's shoulder. "You got a job," he reminded Emmet. "You got to look out for Abe's interests, haven't you? Old Abe is the salt of the earth in spite of his crusty ways. I could tell you things . . ."

Emmet's thoughts flashed sharply back into focus. Here was another

and unexpected friend of Abe Pennick's. His head cleared and he looked the squat, bearded doctor squarely in the eye. "Thanks, Doc," he said. "Yo're right. I'll be in before I leave town."

"I'll look after Root," growled the doctor. "You go on about your business now."

Emmet waited until he saw Root, white beneath his tan, installed in a bed, and then with a final word to Rossiter left.

Dusk had settled. It was past supper time, but Emmet felt no hunger. He went back toward the Adobe Walls, stopping at the livery barn to be sure that the wagon had left with Mrs. Jacobs. Reassured on that score, he went on down to the saloon.

There were few men in the saloon. Charlie Gehring was behind the bar and he silently poured Emmet a drink of whisky and pushed out the glass. "We heard about Al," he said. "I had one of the boys stay at the doc's until you got him off the table. What does Doc say now?"

"Nothin'," Emmet answered, setting down the whisky glass. "Charlie, what about Paris? What happened?"

Gehring swore in the drawling, emotionless tone of the true artist of profanity. "It wasn't an hour after it happened before they'd had a justice hearing," he said. "Emmet, this damn' town needs cleanin'. Old Bart Acorn turned Paris loose on his own recognizance. Paris claimed self-defense and he had everybody from Art Tawson on down to prove it."

Emmet stared at the man behind the bar. "Well," he said slowly, "by God!"

Gehring shook his head. "Not by God," he refuted, "by law."

Emmet pushed out his glass. "An' I've got to go up to the jail an' tell old Abe Pennick about this," he announced.

Gehring's face hardened. "I like you, Emmet," he said. "I've knowed you a long time. I can't understand why you keep on workin' for that woman killin' old—"

"Drop it, Charlie!" commanded Emmet softly. "Don't say nothin' you'll be sorry of later."

Gehring set the bottle beside Emmet's glass. "Mebbe yo're right," he drawled. "Still—"

"Just let it lay, Charlie," ordered Emmet, and catching the hardness in the youngster's face, Charlie Gehring dropped the subject.

Emmet saw Abe Pennick at the jail after he left the Adobe Walls. Pennick listened stolidly to Emmet's news. He had already heard of the shooting from Tawson. When Emmet finished the recital the old man leaned against the bars and stared at his rider.

"Emmet," he said abruptly, "do you want to quit? You can take that little pod of cows of yore's an' move 'em, you know. You ain't tied to the AP."

For a moment Emmet was speechless. His face reflected his feelings so plainly that even Abe Pennick, handicapped by the dim light of the jail corridor, could read them. "No!" snapped Emmet Morse. "I ain't goin' to quit. You can't fire me an' make it stick. Al was downed. They got you in jail, an' somebody took a shot at me. I ain't goin' to quit!"

There was satisfaction in Pennick's voice when he spoke. "I ain't goin' to fire you," he said. "They got a case against me, Emmet, but so help me God, I never done that shootin'. I can't help you, boy. It's all on yore shoulders, but if you can prove that I never done that, I'll die happy an' I'll pay you—"

"You'll pay hell!" snapped Emmet. "I'm goin' out to the ranch now an' start from there. There must be somethin' fishy about this some place, an' by glory, I aim to find out what it is!"

He wheeled and strode down the corridor. With his face against the

bars, Pennick smiled after the tall, straight puncher. Here was one man who still believed in him. Abe Pennick was mighty thankful that they still made men like Emmet Morse.

Emmet's intentions of going to the AP immediately were somewhat stalled. Various men hailed him, inquiring after Al Root. Down the street near Rosenblatt's Store, George Swearer stopped him and engaged him in conversation.

It was fully night now and the moon was rising. With twenty-two miles, almost four hours' ride ahead of him, Emmet was in a hurry. He had wanted to go to the doctor's and then home but he could not shake Swerer.

The big land speculator had to talk. He told Emmet that he had fired Paris, cut him loose from the Cross in a Box payroll, and he also explained Paris' version of the shooting. Paris, it seemed, had known Al Root back in Montana when Root was a wild, gun-throwing youngster. Paris, a deputy sheriff, had been forced to arrest Root at one time and that arrest had earned Root a term in jail.

"I reckon that was why Al was sore," said Swerer. "You saw him go for his gun yourself, Emmet. You know Paris had to shoot."

Emmet nodded glumly. He knew that Swerer was right."

"The hell of it is that I'm partly to blame." Swerer's big face was earnest. "I'd seen Al up the street just a little before that and told him to come down an' have a drink. Maybe if I hadn't told him that, him an' Paris would never of got together."

"It had to happen sometime." Emmet felt a momentary twinge of pity for the big, earnest man. "Don't blame yourself, Mister Swerer."

"I do though." Swerer put his hand on Emmet's shoulder. Emmet didn't like it, but he suffered the hand to remain. "I'll tell you," Swerer continued. "You're short handed with Al gone. I'll send Shorty over to ride with you for awhile. Will that help out?"

It was a generous, kindly offer. It rang true but still . . .

Emmet shook his head. "Thank you kindly, Mister Swerer," he said. "I reckon though that there's no need of that. I'll make out. If you'll excuse me now?" He stepped from under Swerer's hand and went on down the street toward the doctor's, cursing himself. It would have been a help to have an extra rider, especially one that he didn't have to pay for. Why in the name of common sense had he turned Swerer down?

The road out to the AP seemed extra long that night. Emmet sent his horse along the familiar trail and lost himself in moody reflection. He hadn't a thing to tie on to anyone. All he had to go by was the fact that Abe Pennick said he was innocent and that somebody had taken a shot at him in the Shadow Creek teacherage. There was one other thing: Little Ole, under questioning, had said that his father had been too ill to get out of bed and that his mother hadn't butchered any beef. That was of minor importance. Little Ole might not have known, particularly if the beef had been butchered out on the range. Still it was something.

On the other hand, there was old U. S. safe in the livery back in Upton, evidence against Abe Pennick. There was little Ole, ready to swear to the fact that the man who had killed his father and mother had been riding U. S., and there were plenty of people in town to state that Abe Pennick had come in on the horse. Men had been hanged on less evidence than that. Emmet was worried about Al, too. Things hadn't been too promising at the hospital. It all looked mighty black to Emmet Morse.

He reached the AP road where it

joined the main road and turned off on it. His horse lifted its head and snorted, then slowed. Emmet sent the animal along again. He crowned the little rise that was west of the AP. Below him in the starlit night, he could see red points glowing and the smell of smoke came sharply to his nostrils. Emmet kicked in his spurs. There had been a fire at the AP.

There had been a fire, no mistake. All that remained of the log ranch house was a mass of glowing coals and smoulderng wood. Emmet, leaving his horse, went to the ruin. There was nothing he could do, not a thing. The house was completely gone. The bunkhouse was intact, as were the corrals and the barn and sheds, but of the big house, not one stick remained above another.

Emmet knew that the fire had been set. There were no two ways about that. He and Al Root had done their cooking in the bunkhouse. The big house had been locked and closed since Abe Pennick had been in jail. Knowing that the fire had been set, he knew too that he couldn't prove it. The hardest thing in the world to prove is arson. Emmet spent what time he could scouting the ruins.

Then because he was tired, and because he knew that he must have daylight for a thorough examination, he went to the bunkhouse. Examining its interior with a lighted lamp, he found nothing disturbed. Whoever had set fire to the AP ranch house had left the bunkhouse strictly alone. Emmet swore. Hs couldn't understand why the big house had been burned and not the other buildings. He knew what he would find in the morning. The man clever enough to do this would leave no signs of his work.

Morning found Emmet again at the still smoking ruins. He had slept but little. He circled the house, kicked through the cooling ashes and found exactly nothing. To all appearances the house had just simply caught fire from a carelessly left stove, and burned to the ground, but Emmet knew that wasn't so. He wanted to go to Upton and report to Art Tawson but he had nothing to prove. If he couldn't find anything the chances were that Tawson couldn't. It was a day-killing job to go to town and return. There was work on the place, work that had been neglected. One man to a place that took at least four good hands to hold it down, Emmet grinned mirthlessly. He surely had a chore on his hands.

He cooked a bite of breakfast, ran in some horses and saddling a big hammer-headed black, started out toward the west. The first thing he planned to do was to see if the Cross in a Box cattle were being thrown back toward their range. Then when that was done he knew that he should ride to the line camp on Eighty Eight mountain and see how things were there. He needed men, Emmet did, and he thought as he rode that he would have to get some. One more man at least. He cudgeled his brain for a likely candidate. It would have to be someone from out of the country, he thought. Feeling against Abe Pennick was too bitter for a local man to take the job. Except for Sol Rosenblatt, Doc Rossiter and himself, Abe Pennick apparently didn't have a friend in the Mule Hill country.

The young puncher was oblivious to his surroundings as he thought, jerking back to consciousness when Blaze breasted a drift fence.

CHAPTER V

MOONLIGHT BATTLE

Emmet rode his west line that morning. There were still plenty of Cross in a Box cattle in evidence. Emmet threw a few bunches back toward the west, but he didn't have time to do a great deal of work. At noon he was back at the AP, and as he rode in he saw Sol Rosenblatt's wagon in the yard.

Rosenblatt met Emmet at the door of the bunkhouse. The little merchant was excited, so excited that he could scarcely talk. Emmet gave him the details of his discovery of the fire and told him why he had not come to town to report it. He also told Rosenblatt of the happenings in Upton and demanded news of Al Root. Root, Rosenblatt told Emmet, was still alive, holding his own, but unconscious. Doc Rossiter did not give much hope for his life.

The little store keeper was so excited, so upset, that it was some time before he recalled his errand. When it did come to his mind he brought a letter from his pocket and handed it over to Emmet. Emmet noted that the envelope bore Archer's return and tore it open. Unfolding the sheet of paper inside, he read silently. When he had finished he looked at Sol.

"So?" he drawled.

"So Archer has been scared out." Sol Rosenblatt was sibilant in his resentment. "Somebody hass got to him an' scared him, Emmet. He retires from the case, no?"

Emmet nodded. "That's what the letter says," he replied.

"He iss scared!" Sol was mad all the way through. "He iss scared because he thinks this business will hurt his practice an' because he hass learned that Abe's money iss tied up."

"What we goin' to do, Uncle Sol?" Emmet asked simply.

"We get another lawyer. One who iss not scared!"

"From where?"

"From the capitol. I haff a friend I will write today. We get us a lawyer. The grand jury will meet in two weeks. But Emmet—"

Sol paused.

"Yes?" said Emmet.

"We got to haff some money!"

"Can you lend me some, Uncle Sol?" asked Emmet.

Sol Rosenblatt got up from the bunk he had occupied, and paced back and forth. His words showed his emotion for he was seldom profane. "That iss the hell of it!" he snapped. "I can't."

Emmet waited. He knew that there was a good reason behind Rosenblatt's words.

Sol continued. "I am all tied up, Emmet. I haff borrowed as much as I can from the bank an' the store iss in debt. I went into wool last summer. You know I bought a lot of wool. Now the market iss down an' I am owing the money an' I can't turn loose. In a month, yess! I let you haff all the money you want, but right now . . . No! I haffen't got it!"

Emmet nodded. "Then," he said slowly, "I reckon we're up against it. Abe's bank account tied up an' you tied up, too. I don't know where we can get any money." He paused, thinking. Then he grinned.

"We got a lot of cattle," he said. "I got some an' Abe's got more. I got Abe's power of attorney. You go find me a cow buyer, Uncle Sol, an' send him out here. Why hell! Money ain't nothin' to us when we got cows!"

"The market iss down," warned Sol. "You lose on it plenty. You—"

"It's a damn' sight better to lose on cows than on the end of a rope," Emmet said soberly. "We got to have a lawyer for Abe. You write yore friend in Cheyenne an' get a cow buyer out here. I'll show him the prettiest bunch of heifers he ever saw. I'll round 'em up today an' tomorrow an' hold 'em for him right here at the ranch."

Sol nodded. "I get one here," he announced. "I'll write that lawyer, too. Now Emmet, about this fire?"

Emmet grunted. "I told you it was set," he reminded. "I can't prove it but I'm beginnin' to get an idea why. Sol, do you remember that railroad colonization agent that was in here?"

Rosenblatt nodded. "You don't think?" he began.

"I'm just startin' to think," interrupted Emmet. "You go ahead back to town. You get that lawyer down here an' you get me a cattle buyer. Tell Tawson about the fire an' let him come out when he's got time. Damn it, Uncle Sol! I'm beginnin' to get an idea!"

There was more talk between the two, talk concerning details. Emmet threw a cold lunch together and they ate. When the meal was finished Sol Rosenblatt with his buckboard and mules started back to Upton; while Emmet, catching up a fresh horse, saddled the animal and started south and east, more or less in the direction of the Shadow Creek school house. There was a bunch of two-year-old heifers and some yearlings, both of his brand and AP's, working along the south end of the north fork of Shadow Creek. Emmet thought that he could pick them up that afternoon. He wanted about forty head, a car load at least, for he wasn't going into a legal battle for Abe Pennick's life without plenty of financial ammunition.

He wanted heifers for he knew that the big steer shipments of the fall roundups had glutted the feeder and killer market for steers. Stockers were his best bet and, too, the AP had shipped most of their top steers the first of November. What were left weren't tops and would not bring the money that Emmet felt he needed.

The little bunch of cattle he sought had moved further down the creek and when he finally sighted them he was within four miles of the Shadow Creek school. He stopped his big ridge runner and considered the situation. It was about two o'clock. He could ride over to the school house, have a word with Valorie and see that Mrs. Jacobs was on the job, come back, pick up the cattle and have them through the fence of the pasture immediately around the AP before dark. Accordingly, he set his course to the east and in perhaps thirty minutes was riding up to the fench by the school.

School was still in session and Emmet left his horse at the fence and went to the teacherage to talk with Mrs. Jacobs.

Elsie Jacobs, competence personified, met him at the door and told him to come in. She was a broad woman, almost as wide as she was long, with a flat Irish face that belied her name. Her blue eyes twinkled as she brought Emmet a plate of gingerbread and a cold drink, and then seated herself opposite him.

"Couldn't stay away, could you?" she demanded.

Emmet munched gingerbread and grinned. "It's hard to do when there's cookin' like this around," he answered.

"Valorie made the gingerbread," said Mrs. Jacobs. "You ain't the only one that thinks she's a good cook. There's others."

Emmet, his mouth full, nodded and grinned again.

"I don't know why you wanted me out here unless it was to run off competition," Mrs. Jacobs pursued her subject. "Nothin' happens around here. If it wasn't for that bullet hole in that chair I'd think you dreamed it."

"Competition?" questioned Emmet.

The woman laughed. You're smooth, Emmet, you are," she said. "As if you don't know that half the Mule Hills wouldn't come an' sit on the front stoop. There's some competition from Upton, too."

"So?" Emmet took another piece of gingerbread.

Elsie Jacobs nodded. "George Swerer," she confided.

"George comes around, does he?" Emmet was interested.

"Around? Heavens! He's under foot all the time. You mean to tell me you didn't know that?"

"I didn't. No." Emmet asked a question with his eyes.

"Oh, he doesn't get any place." Mrs. Jacobs helped herself to the gingerbread. "He doesn't get any encouragement around here."

There was childish laughter outside and the sound of voices. Emmet got up. "School's out," he said. "I'll get a word with Valorie and then go on. I got a little bunch of stock to move."

"Don't tell her what I said," cautioned Mrs. Jacobs. "She don't like George Swerer."

"I'm not sure that I do," said Emmet, and went out.

He talked with Valorie in the school room for a few minutes, found that everything was going smoothly and that there was no trouble. He was ready to leave when Valorie made a request.

"Emmet," she said, "does Mrs. Jacobs have to stay here? She's a good soul, but she talks incessantly and I can't get anything done around the house."

"I feel safer with her here." Emmet frowned. "If you don't want her though, Valorie, she needn't stay."

Valorie smiled. "What's on your mind, Emmet?" she demanded. "You're thinking about something."

"There's lots to think about," Emmet answered cryptically. "You keep Elsie Jacobs here a little longer, Valorie."

The girl smiled, nodded, and giving his hand a squeeze, conducted him to the door. When he left she was standing in the school house doorway, with one hand lifted in a parting salute.

Emmet picked up his little bunch of heifers on the way back to the AP. He didn't cut any from the bunch, just made a drive of it and got about twenty-five. He wanted enough from which a cow buyer could pick a car load. With the little bunch strung out ahead of him he rode north.

Emmet, his mind busy, just pushed the cattle along, his horse and body attending more or less automatically to the work. He trusted Valorie, trusted her a lot. He knew that George Swerer wasn't getting any place making advances to her, but just the same he didn't like it. It might be a good plan to go over to the Cross in a Box and tell Swerer about it. Emmet grinned a little sheepishly. A fine big ninny he'd be pulling a stunt like that. No, that wouldn't do.

Eventually he struck the gate in the pasture fence. He dropped his bunch of cattle, circled them, opened the gate and circling back started his bunch through the wire.

Now in that bunch of heifers was one of Emmet's own, a calf with a crooked neck. How the neck got crooked or what caused it to stay that way, Emmet didn't know, but he did know that it couldn't be straightened. He'd tried that a time or two without success. This little red and white Hereford carried its head at an angle to the body, its neck bent around toward the right.

When Emmet tried to put the bunch through he got the leaders all right and the rest followed, all but the calf with the crooked neck. That little sister hesitated, took a circle out from the gate to get a look at it and then pointed for a spot some place up the wire. She hit the fence post right by the gate.

The calf was fat, in good shape and of good color. Her only defect was the crooked neck. Emmet bent her back and tried again. This time she hit the post on the other side of the gate. Emmet made five shots at the gate with that calf, the calf

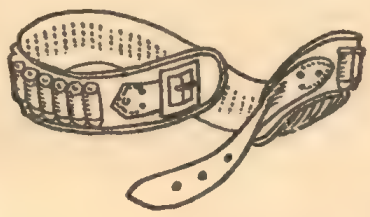
willing and trying all the time. On the fifth pass she made it, and Emmet put the gate back and went on to the house for supper.

Dusk had settled while he had worked with the calf. Now as he rode in the edge of the full moon peered over Eighty Eight mountain, gradually flooding the range with light. At the house when Emmet reached it, he found George Swerer waiting for him.

A man may have a lot of patience in him, but trying five times to put a calf through a gate will use up some of it. On top of that Emmet had plenty of trouble to think about and George Swerer was to blame for at least part of it. He wasn't, so to speak, really pleased to see George. Emmet got down from his horse, grunted a greeting and started for the corral.

"I been waitin' for you, Emmet," announced Swerer. "I thought maybe you'd thought over my offer to loan you a man. Do you want one?"

Emmet slipped the saddle down off Blackie. He'd seen that there were horses in the corral and he intended to pick up a night horse from the bunch. He shook his head at Swerer.



"No thanks," he said gruffly.

Swerer watched Emmet turn Blackie loose and carry his saddle to the shed. "Too bad about your fire," he commented when Emmet came out.

"Tough," responded Emmet.

"Did you have a chance to go through Pennick's papers before the house burned?" There was a lot more than curiosity in Swerer's voice.

Emmet shook his head. "Nope, I didn't," he answered.

Somehow Swerer seemed relieved. "I just wondered," he said.

Emmet stared at the man. He wondered why Swerer wondered. There was something in the back of his head that told him that here was an answer to something, but he couldn't place it.

Swerer asked another question. "I hear Archer quit Pennick's case," he ventured. "Have you got another lawyer?"

"Not yet," Emmet replied.

"Bohannon might handle it," Swerer suggested.

"He might not, too," grunted Emmet.

"Been workin' today?" Swerer changed the subject.

Emmet sent a barbed shaft. He was tired of this questioning. "Since you tied up the bank account I got to have some money," he said sarcastically. "I rounded up a little bunch of heifers to sell. Cattle buyer comin' tomorrow. If you really want to do somethin', Swerer, you can release that money in the bank."

Swerer's face was the least bit red. "I been intendin' to 'tend to that," he began lamely, "but I been so blame' busy."

Emmet lost his temper. He didn't have a great deal left. "Busy bustin' around where you ain't wanted," he snarled. "Swerer, I'll thank you to stay away from the Shadow Creek school!"

It was a fool thing to do and say but it was out. Swerer, sure of his ground now, grinned broadly. "Cuttin' in on you?" he asked. "Shucks, Emmet, you oughtn't to get mad about a common little—"

He stopped right there. Emmet's big brown fist smashed against Swerer's lips and checked the rest of the utterance.

Swerer was a big man, bigger than Emmet. The blow set him back on his heels, but it takes more than a blow on the mouth to knock a man out. The chin or the temple or the solar plexis is a lot more efficient. Swerer, recovering from that blow, bounced back and the ham-like right fist he swung didn't do Emmet any real good. The two didn't box; they

stood and slugged. Emmet got a dandy in the eye and another on top of his lowered head as he charged in, that made him see stars. In return he struck Swerer in the belly, over the heart and on the neck.

The fight raged in the moonlight, the men's shadows great distorted monsters on the ground. Both men big, both hard, and both mad. Emmet was a little the angrier of the two, but he didn't see red. That saved him. Swerer was like a bull in an arena. He charged, bellowing curses and swinging his fists. Emmet was set to receive him. The AP rider brought one up from his heels and by good fortune it went to the proper place. That big right fist crashed against Swerer's beard stubbled chin and the owner of that chin went down, out completely, his eyes rolled back and his body limp.

Emmet panting from his exertions, rested a moment waiting for Swerer to get up. When that didn't happen he went to the corral fence, got Swerer's horse and led the animal back. The horse was docile. He stood while Emmet, tugging and grunting, got Swerer up to the animal's side. Swerer was beginning to come out of it. He was still in a daze but able to help himself somewhat. Emmet got him into the saddle, put the reins in his hands and started him out. Then Emmet went to the pump to bathe his aching face and repair his cuts and bruises. He was still angry, and when he went into the bunkhouse and set about preparing supper the bacon that sizzled in the pan was no hotter than his temper.

Still, angry as he was, he didn't sit up and brood over it. Emmet had been short on sleep since the night he had been shot at in the teacherage. He was feeling it. When he had finished with his supper dishes, he dragged in a tin wash tub which he partially filled with hot water from the tea kettle and cold water from the pump. There was a great deal of lathering and splashing in the bunkhouse after that. Then Emmet turned in and slept like the dead.

Morning came too quickly. Emmet wasn't ready for it. Instead of getting up at daylight he turned over and slept another hour. Refreshed, he crawled out, made his toilet and cooked breakfast.

Saddling Blue, Emmet figured out his day's riding. The AP was a combination of open range and fenced land, some of the fenced land being owned, some leased. The open range was a block that lay toward the west, bordering the Cross in a Box and used by both the Cross in a Box and the AP. East of the AP headquarters was owned land, forty sections of it running from above the ranch on the North Fork almost to Shadow Creek south, and nearly to the Mule Hills east. Then there was the summer pasture on the Mule Hills and Eighty-Eight mountain was at the east line.

Beyond the lease fence was rough country, broken by canyons and rim rock, a hard, rough country in which little ranchers held sway throughout the summer, taking their stuff down to the flats east of the Mule Hills in the winter time. Emmet had lived somewhere near Upton almost all his life and he had never completely covered the Mule Hills. The men who worked their cattle up to the fence on the AP lease did not ship or get their supplies at Upton, using Freemont, east of the range, as their town and shipping point. Emmet didn't know half of them.

While he saddled Blue, Emmet decided that he would ride down to where he had left the heifers in the lower pasture, look over the bunch and then pick them up and move them closer to the ranch. When that was done he planned to work over east and collect another little bunch that he knew of. He climbed up on Blue and was under way.

CHAPTER VI

CROOKED-NECK TRAIL

He reached the place where he had dropped his drive the night before and circled out from it to pick up the heifers. His circles grew wider and wider. Presently he reined in Blue, pushed back his hat and scratched his head. The heifers were gone! Plumb gone! Here was something to think about. Emmet smiled grimly. It had been plenty light enough last night to drive cattle!

Circling again Emmet picked up tracks in the grass, wet now from melted frost. He followed along, believing that he had what he sought. Aside from a few scattering animals the heifers were the only cattle in this particular pasture. The tracks led straight for the east gate.

When he came to the gate Emmet rode circle. He worked down along the wire and presently he found what he was looking for. Plainly he saw where a single animal had bent away from the gate and then made a try for it and gone through. The crooked necked calf! Emmet knew that he was right now. He took Blue through the gate and went on.

Beyond the fence was still another pasture and here more cattle came into view. These ware AP stock cows, big boned, red and white Herefords. Their tracks obliterated the tracks of the little bunch Emmet followed, but he kept steadily along his way. He was not following tracks now, he was making straight for the east gate of that pasture. Passing above Swanson's fence he rounded the spur of Eighty-Eight mountain and there where the fence went over the hill struck his second gate. Again he circled and again he found where one animal of a little bunch had swung wide of the gate, pointed for it and struck the fence. He found other circles made by the calf, but he did not stop. The calf had gone through this gate. Emmet followed.

Now before him were the roughs. To his left and some miles away was the Eighty-Eight line camp. This country was not entirely fenced but the cattle were held from working further east by drift fences across canyons. There were gates in most of those fences. The tracks of the stolen heifers were lost in the rocks and barren earth of the mountain side but somewhere, at one of those gates in a drift fence, Emmet knew that he would find the trail of the crooked necked calf. he rode up the draw, Blue scrambling and heaving over the rocks on the steep slope.

Fortune favored Emmet. When he reached the fence the gate was down, and there just at the fence was the crooked necked calf. Emmet's lips lifted into a thin, crooked grin. This then, was the way. He knew now just where he would find his bunch of cattle.

He left the calf at the fence and rode through the gate. Blue followed the trail up the rough canyon. Presently Emmet swung the horse wide and climbed a ridge. He followed along the ridge for some distance and then dropped back toward the canyon again. Half way down he reined in and stopped. There below him was his little bunch of heifers grazing peacefully in a park, and at the edge of the park was the carcass of an animal. It glinted in the sun. Emmet rode on down.

The heifers had not been rustled, they were still on AP range. The whole thing had been crude and ill planned. The AP had plenty of cows, plenty of breeding stock to sell. At the most this was simply an inconvenience. Whoever had done this had acted like a child, had simply tried to make trouble. It looked like a case of spite, pure and simple, spite against Emmet. And who had reason to spite Emmet? Again he grinned his thin, crooked grin. He knew that answer.

When he reached the edge of the park he stopped beside the carcass.

It was that of a horse from which the skin had been flayed. Coyotes and ravens had already been at work. The stench was not pleasant. Emmet began to circle around the swollen carcass and then stopped Blue short. There was a rock near the body and at its edge fresh earth showed. That rock had been moved recently. It was a big boulder. Why had it been moved?

Emmet got down from Blue and searched around for a pole. He found one and by its aid pried up the rock. He slipped a smaller stone under the big one to chock it and then dropping the pole, he bent down and reached underneath. When he brought his hand back he had a corner of horsehide in his grasp. He pulled the hide on out, spread it open and stood looking at it.

The hide was white. The brand, small and on the shoulder, was unfamiliar to Emmet, but covering the brand and the shoulder was a rough brown stained map of the United States!

There couldn't be two horses with that peculiar marking and yet here was evidence that there were, or at least that there had been! Emmet again bent down over the hide to examine it. He looked at it closely and then straightened up. The brand should have been a scar, hairless and white. It was a scar and it was hairless, but it wasn't white. The hide had been stained and the stain showed on the scar!

Emmet, standing above the hide, read the brand aloud. "Dot Bar Dot." Who owned such a combination? He didn't know. No matter now. The thing for him to do was to replace things just as they had been so that no one might suspect his visit, then get to town and get hold of Art Tawson. Here was evidence, conclusive evidence, that Abe Pennick hadn't killed Ole Swanson and his wife.

Emmet refolded the hide and returned it to its hiding place under the boulder. He erased any sign of his visit to the carcass and the rock, and then, catching Blue, who had stood, reins trailing, watching the proceedings, he mounted and started back the way he had come. When he rode through the gate in the drift fence at the end of the canyon he saw the crooked necked calf grazing at a little distance. Emmet reined in and addressed the calf.

"Baby," he said, "yo're my calf an' as far as I'm concerned you ain't never goin' to be shipped. Yo're goin' to die of old age!"

The calf circled wide and arrived at a fresh clump of grass, and Emmet, grinning, rode on.

He felt good, mighty good. There were things he didn't understand, but they didn't worry him a great deal. He wanted to tell about this, wanted to talk, particularly to Valorie Ulrick. He knew that the girl would rejoice with him. It wasn't much out of his way to go to the school house and the trail was better than to go straight across. Accordingly, when he cleared the canyon he swung a little south.

It was noon when he reached the school. Valorie and Mrs. Jacobs were eating dinner. Emmet tied Blue to the fence and went to the teacherage. One look at his face and Valorie was up and beside him.

"Emmet!" she exclaimed, "you've found something! What is it? Tell me!"

Emmet caught the girl's shoulders in his two hands. "I've found what will clear Abe Pennick," he said hoarsely. "I followed a fool calf's trail, Valorie, an' I've got Abe cleared. I got to go to town an' get hold of Tawson."

Mrs. Jacobs was putting a place on the table for Emmet. She dropped the silverware with a clatter at this

announcement and joined the two at the door. "What did you find?" she demanded.

Valorie pulled Emmet into the room. "Tell us while you eat," she said. "Oh, Emmet! I'm so happy!"

Emmet sat down at the table. Elsie Jacobs loaded his plate and poured a cup of coffee and as he ate and drank Emmet told the two of his discovery. They listened, silent and thrilled.

"I can't prove who done it," he said in conclusion, "I don't know who owned that horse an' I don't know who put it there. All I know is that this will let Abe out. Look, Valorie, here's the way it stacks up. Somebody wanted Swanson out of the way. They wanted to plant the killin' an' they picked Abe for the goat. They got that white horse, stained his hide an' used him to hang the killin' on Abe. Then to make sure, they killed the horse, skinned him in case somebody might find him, an' hid the hide under that big rock. It'll clear Pennick!"

"But who?" asked Elsie Jacobs. "Who?"

Emmet shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "I got ideas but I can't prove nothin'. That hide was stained. Mebbe if I could find out what the stain was an' where it come from I'd have somethin'. It's a dark stain, looks like dark brown wood. If— What's the matter, girl?"

Valorie's face had turned white. Without answering Emmet's question she rose from the table, went to a bureau, and opening a drawer took out an apron. She came back to Emmet and spread the apron out before him. There, on the white surface was a dark brown stain.

"Did it look like that?" she asked, her voice small.

Emmet examined the stain. "That's the color," he said slowly. "Valorie—"

"I got that stain on my apron when I was shelling the walnuts mother sent." The girl spoke steadily. "George Swerer was here that night and helped me. He saw the stain and he stained his own hands. Two or three days later he asked me for a bag of walnuts. He said that he wanted his cook to make some walnut cookies like his mother used to make. I gave them to him."

Emmet's face was blank. "If stain was bought at a store it could be traced," he said slowly. "I reckon George was in a hurry, too. Thanks, Valorie."

Emmet rose from the table, wiping his lips with his napkin. His eyes, blue and wide, were blank. Apparently he was not seeing anything in the room. Then he spoke again, suddenly.

"Where's little Ole?"

"Tawson took him to town last night," Elsie Jacobs answered. "He said they wanted to get his evidence before a notary."

Emmet nodded. "I reckon I'd better go," he said absently. "Valorie, honey—"

The girl, disregarding Mrs. Jacobs' presence, was in Emmet's arms. "You'll take care of yourself?" she pleaded. "You won't do anything rash, Emmet?"

Emmet shook his head. "Nothin' rash, Honey," he promised, and kissed her.

CHAPTER VII

BLOOD PAYMENT

The Blue horse was a traveling fool, and Emmet pushed him right along. Thirteen miles to town from the teacherage, and it was trot, lope, and trot again, all the way in. Blue was sweating and there was froth on the bitts when Emmet reached the outskirts of Upton. He rode into town, striking the main street, and made straight for Tawson's office in the jail.

Before he came to the turn, however, he was hailed from the board sidewalk, and stopped Blue. Doc Rossiter was advancing into the street,

his hand raised. Emmet bent down.

"Mighty glad you come in, Emmet," said Rossiter, stopping beside Blue. "Al's conscious. He wants you. Won't talk to anybody else."

"I got to get Tawson, Doc," said Emmet. "I got to see him. I'll be with you—"

Rossiter shook his head. "I don't think Al's goin' to make it, Emmet," he explained. "There's a chance but it's a slim one. You better go see him now while he can talk."

That put a different aspect on affairs. Emmet nodded. "I'll go right now," he announced. "You comin' with me, Doc?"

"I am," answered Rossiter. "Come on."

As the doctor hurried back to the walk, Emmet turned Blue and, keeping pace with Rossiter, rode back down the street, turned and stopped before the hospital.

He left Blue standing and followed the doctor into the house and down the corridor to Al Root's room. Mrs. Rossiter, who acted as nurse, got up from beside the bed when the two entered, and after a whispered word or two with the physician, left them. Emmet bent over the bed.

Al Root was pale. His face was pinched and drawn and his eyes were bright with a feverish light. "Emmet?" he whispered.

"Right here, Al."

"Tell you somethin'." Emmet bent close to catch the words. "Paris?"

"He's in town, Al," said Emmet.

"Bad," whispered Root. "Knew him in Montana. I was deputy there. Paris framed play on a kid. . . . Bad, Emmet."

Emmet nodded. "I know he's bad, Al," he said firmly.

Root's words trailed on. "I had to . . . kill the kid," he whispered huskily. "Put Paris in the pen . . . I quit carryin' guns then. Left an' come here . . . Abe took me in. . . ."

"I got it, kid!" Emmet's voice was husky.

"Said I'd get Paris if I ever saw him." Root seemed to gain a little strength. "Emmet, Swerer framed the play. Paris is . . . gunman . . . Bad."

"We'll take care of Paris, Al," Emmet put his hand on the wounded man's shoulder. "You quit worryin'."

Al Root's voice trailed off weakly. "Good boy . . . Emmet . . ." he murmured. His eyes closed.

Emmet looked anxiously at Rossiter. The doctor, his eyes alight, bent down over Root. He listened carefully, then straightened.

"Doc?" said Emmet anxiously.

Rossiter nodded. "By glory," he said solemnly, his voice low. "He's asleep, Emmet. By glory! I think he'll make it."

"You heard what he said, Doc?"

"All of it."

"He said Swerer framed the play. I know myself that Swerer invited him down to the Adobe Walls for a drink. What do you think?"

"Paris is bad; no doubt of it," Rossiter answered slowly. "He and George Swerer are together most of the time in spite of Swerer claiming to have let him go. I'd go slow, Emmet."

Emmet frowned. "I've been goin' slow, Doc," he said.

"Keep on. Swerer has that railroad man in town with him. The three of them have been together most of the mornin'. I've seen them around. What did you want to see Tawson about?"

Brought back to the purpose of his errand, Emmet stepped toward the door. "I've got evidence that Abe never done that shootin'," he said shortly. "I reckon I better get to Tawson. You think Al has a chance?"

"Better than he had an hour ago." Rossiter was sober. "He's resting. You've taken a load off his mind, Emmet."

"Look after him, Doc," commanded Emmet. "I've got to be about my business."

Rossiter nodded and Emmet went on out of the room.

He rode back toward the main street. The things Root had told him clicked into place in the pattern in his brain. Paris was a hired killer, that was certain. Therefore, Paris took a definite place in the scheme. Blue, head drooping, stopped in front of the Adobe Walls. As he dismounted and tied Blue, Emmet noticed that there were Cross in a Box horses tied to the hitch rail. He did not, however, see the short figure of Sol Rosenblatt come from his store across the way, stare for a moment and then hurry back into the building.

With Blue tied, Emmet slipped the short thirty-thirty from the scabbard, levered a shell into the barrel and lowered the hammer to half cock. Then, deliberately, he stooped, passed under the hitch rail and walked across the sidewalk to the Adobe Walls.

When he entered the room he stood beside the door for a moment. Charlie Gehring was behind the bar and there were three or four men lined up along it. At the far end, facing the door, were Clyde Paris, George Swerer, and a stranger. Emmet accustomed his eyes to the light as Gehring came toward him up the bar.

Before Gehring reached the end of the bar, Tawson, followed by Sol Rosenblatt, came through the door. Tawson stepped to Emmet's side and put his hand on the thirty-thirty which lay over Emmet's arm.

"I'll just take that gun, Emmet," he said slowly. "I don't want no accidents in Upton."

Emmet was cold, ice cold. He let go his grip on the rifle and Tawson took it, holding it across his arm. The sheriff stood to Emmet's right. Sol Rosenblatt, anxious and fidgeting, was on the other side of the sheriff. Emmet, his eyes fixed on the men at the far end of the bar, started forward, and the sheriff and Sol kept pace with him. When they were half way down the bar Emmet stopped. The men who had been drinking had fallen back and there was a clear place before the tall AP rider. Swerer took a hesitant step toward Emmet, but Paris, his face skeleton-cold, pushed the man back. Paris guessed what was coming. Still it was to Swerer that Emmet spoke.

"George," he said casually, "I found my heifers."

The words came as a shock, they were so utterly different from what Swerer had expected to hear. He stammered for a moment.

"Did yuh?" he began, and then, "That's good, Emmet. I didn't know you'd lost any."

"I hadn't." Emmet's voice was cold. "There was a crooked necked calf with 'em that circled at every gate. They wasn't lost; they was just misplaced."

"I don't see what that's got to do with me," began Swerer. "I . . ."

But Emmet had half turned and was partially facing Tawson, who, puzzled, still stood beside the AP rider. The stock of the thirty-thirty lay across Tawson's arm and he carried the weapon loosely. That smooth walnut was within a foot of Emmet's hand.

"I'd come in to look you up, Art," Emmet said. "You see, I picked up a bunch of heifers to sell to get money for Abe's lawyer. Last night they got misplaced but this crooked necked calf took me right to 'em."

"That's good, Emmet," said Tawson, puzzled.

"Yeah. It was mighty good. You see, under a rock where the heifers was there was a horse hide. A white hide with a brown stained map on it. I found that hide. I even know

where the stain come from. When a man is mad he overplays his hand. Last night I loosened Swerer's teeth for him. Look at his face!"

Swerer ducked his head from the curious eyes that sought his face. The bruises and contusions were plain upon it.

Tawson asked a question. "What are you gettin' at, Emmet?"

"At the bottom of a dirty killin'," answered Emmet grimly. "Al Root come to and talked to me. Puttin' it all together, I got an answer. Swerer was mad last night. He drove my calves off an' he put 'em right in the place where I could find a dirty killer. Paris . . ."

But the strain had been too much for Clyde Paris. He wheeled toward Swerer and his voice rose high and cracked. "You damn' fool! You give it away. You . . ."

The man was mad, mad as a dog with the rabies is mad. He jerked back from Swerer and as he moved, swung his hand toward the gun at his waist. "By God!" he shrilled, "You'll never . . ."

Emmet's hand flashed across to the smooth walnut grip of the thirty-thirty that Tawson held so loosely. The short barrel of the gun described an arc as it was torn from the sheriff's hands. Emmet's left hand flashed up toward the forearm, but before it reached it he had cocked the weapon and pulled trigger. Paris' gun was out and smoking, and glass crashed in the front window of the Adobe Walls. The heavy slow moving slug from that forty-five had missed but the soft point bullet that tore from the throat of the rifle did not miss. Paris was picked up bodily, it seemed, and slammed back, and before he struck the floor, a racing hand and tense trigger finger had sent another slug smashing into his body. The man fell back, spread-eagled on the floor at the front of the bar.

The gray-haired man who had been with Swerer and Paris threw himself sidewise, pitching down to the floor for safety, while Swerer, terror on his face, wheeled and started to run.

Emmet's grim voice stopped him. "Swerer!" called Emmet, and realizing the futility of flight, Swerer jerked up short like a horse on the end of a rope.

Tawson, recovering his equilibrium, snatched the carbine from Emmet's hands. His bellowing voice took charge of the situation. "Now, by God!" he roared. "Charlie, don't let nobody in or out. Hold the door! What the hell is all this about? Emmet, you—" He stopped suddenly.

Emmet, his hands clawlike before him, was advancing on the white faced Swerer, and Swerer was backing away from him. The Cross in a Box owner's foot struck against a cuspidor and he stopped, trembling.

"Tell 'em, Swerer," commanded Emmet. "Tell 'em how you framed it or I'll kill yuh here with my hands!"

Swerer, before that awful, steady advance, broke. His hands went up to his face and he babbled through them.

"I never killed nobody! It was Paris! He shot Swanson. Oh, my God!" His voice shook so that he could not continue, His big body trembled and he was forced to lean against the wall for support. Tawson, catching his words, put the carbine on the bar top, and stepping over one of Paris' outflung arms, snatched Swerer by the shoulder and shook him harshly. "Talk!" he commanded. "Speak up!"

It was not so easy as that. They had to pour a glass of whisky into Swerer before he could regain a measure of composure. The gray-haired man with Swerer hastily gulped a glass of the fiery liquor.

When Swerer did talk he told a complete story. Emmet stood by, grim faced, and when the man hesitated, a look at the tall AP rider sent him on again.

"It was Paris," he said. "I'd knowed him before this. I sent for him to help me out an' when he come in on a white horse—"

"With a Dot Bar Dot brand!" snapped Emmet.

Swerer nodded weakly. "You see," he stammered, brushing his hand nervously across his mouth, "I'd put Swanson up to that homestead idea. I'd staked him. Then Pennick was good to Swanson an' Swanson crossed me. I wanted the AP. I was on a deal with the railroad for a colonization scheme in here. Shadow Creek was to be damned an' the land irrigated. I told them I had it—"

"This is all news to me, gentlemen," interrupted the gray-haired man. "My name is Oliver. I'm the colonization agent for the P and SW. I'd been in here before, trying to get land and—"

"You ain't important!" snapped Emmet. "We sabe that you made Swerer an offer. You—"

"But I thought that he owned the whole thing," protested Oliver. "He wrote me."

"Shut up!" Tawson snarled the words. "Go on, Swerer!"

"Swanson said that he was going to deed the place to Pennick as soon as he got it proved up," Swerer continued the tale. "He crossed me. Paris drifted in. He'd done a job up north and . . . well, I had to take care of him. I told him about my trouble with Swanson. Paris had a white horse. We scouted around the AP and . . ."

"So you got some walnut shells from Valorie an' put a stain on the white horse so he looked like U. S.," Emmet broke into Swerer's recital. "Then yuh waited until you seen Abe start out on U. S. an' went over to Swanson's an' done the job. You killed an' skinned an AP calf to make it look like Swanson was rustlin' so that there'd be a reason for Abe killin' Swanson. You dirty—"

"I never shot Swanson!" Swerer's voice went up in a wail. "It was Paris. He downed Mrs. Swanson by mistake. She was wearin' her husband's clothes. He didn't know. He—"

"He'd planned to have her for a witness," grated Emmet. "I get that. See how they worked it, Art?"

"Some of it," he growled. "The thing that gets me is—"

"I rounded up a little bunch of heifers yesterday," interrupted Emmet. "I was goin' to sell 'em to get some cash. Swerer had Abe's bank account attached. It was him burned the house. He knew I'd find a receipt for some money that Abe had paid him an' he claimed Abe still owed him. Ain't that so, Swerer?"

George Swerer nervously licked his lips and nodded weakly.

Emmet went on. "Swerer come over, askin' me if I'd gone through Abe's papers. When he done that I knew there was somethin' wrong. He made a crack an' I beat the hell out of him. He knew about the heifers an' he run 'em last night. I reckon he was along when Paris shot the Swansons. Anyhow, he drove that bunch right straight to where the white horse had been killed an' the hide hid. That's how I found out."

Tawson nodded slowly. "I'll have to get Bart Acorn," he said. "We'll have to go before him an' you'll all have to make a statement. You killed a man, Emmet. There'll have to be a coroner's inquest an' we'll have to get a statement from Root if he can talk. There's a whole heap of things to do, Emmet. We'll—"

But Emmet interrupted. "Then for the Lord's sake get at it!" he rasped. "I got to make a ride tonight."

"A ride?" Tawson was incredulous. "A ride, Emmet?"

A slow grin broke over Emmet Morse's tense face. "Yeah, a ride," he answered. "I got to go to the Shadow Creek school house. There's a girl out there will want to know about this."

(The End)

The next thing anybody knew there was smoke, and Butch Bates was not making all of it.

BUNK-HOUSE GOLIATH

When A Waddie's Barely Big Enough To Spit Over His Own Belt Buckle He Has No Business Going Against A Bruiser Who Slaps Braunks Down With The Flat Of His Hand.

By

TEX JANIS

"Geef," said Tad Lang, this here government of our'n is overlookin' a bet."

"How come," asked Geef, after licking his lower lip to keep it from cracking when he spoke.

"Well, up at Washington they got an old marble-top bureau like the one grammaw used to have in the parlor, with a bead-work pomgranite on one side, and the chunk of gold ore that Uncle Si brought back from Californy in '49, on the other. They call it the Bureau of Standards."

"Aw, hell, Tad," grinned Geef. "You are always tellin' somethin' and usin' big words, just to get me surrounded."

"No, I ain't doin' that," declared Tad. "This is straight goods. The drawers of that bureau is plum full of instruments that they uses to weigh and measure things. They can measure a split cobweb, and weigh a gnat's whisker. Then again they got some bigger tools, that they can weigh a mountain with, but—"

"Aw, hell, Tad. They can't weigh no mountain."

"Shore they can, but they's one thing that ain't got, and orto have. It would save a lot of trouble."

"What's that?" asked Geef.

"Why, it's a instrument to tell how bad a man is. Some simple little dingus that would separate men into classes, like they does apples and potatoes, so the little ones would fall into the first barrel, the next size into the next barrel, and so on. Finally the big boys, the real bad ones, would drop off where they could be counted. That way, a feller could tell whether a gent was just a crow-hopper, and back-humper, or a real sunfisher and fence-row buckin' hellion."

"Aw, hell, Tad," grinned Geef. "You are always thinkin' of something. You got more sense than a cowhand needs, and not enough to do anything else."

The Smoky Valley was the widest stretch of unfenced open range left in the world, as far as any one knew, and the Long O ranch was right in the middle of it, on Big Smoky River. Tad and Geef were just two cowhands, and they were jogging along the dusty trail toward the ranch, when Tad made his startling announcement.

Tad was a husky, broad-shouldered rascal. He was not a big fish. Just nice pan-size, but he looked like a giant by the side of Geef. Tad had a way of leading up to things of grave importance, with a lot of foolishness.

Geef looked as little like a human as anything that ever forked a horse and roped a cow. He would weigh about a hundred and fifteen pounds with his chaps, spurs and gun on him. His hair was white, and his eyebrows so white that he looked as if he didn't have any. His eyes had wanted to be blue, hesitated, and decided on a queer gray. From the time grass began to rise, until the first frost came, Geef's lower lip was always sunburned and sore. His lower jaw protruded, and instead of his upper teeth closing over his lowers, they dropped back of them, like a bull-terrier's teeth.

Geef's lip hung out in the weather, and even his broad Stetson wouldn't shade it. So he wore a "blab." Just a piece of an old boot-top, cut in a crescent, like a real heavy moustache. A string was tied in each horn of the crescent, carried back and tied behind Geef's neck. Thus, the blab was held under his nose, and his lip protected in a measure from the sun. This device didn't help Geef's looks any, but Tad said it didn't hurt any, for the more of Geef's face there was covered, the better he looked. Geef couldn't speak without cracking his lip, unless he wet it first, so he had a habit of running his red tongue out, with the quick movement of a snake's tongue, just before he spoke.

Everybody on the Long O wondered why a nice, human-looking chap like Tad Lang had tied up with Geef. They finally decided that it was for the purpose of contrast. It made Tad look real handsome.

The two had ridden another half mile, and Tad had not spoken again. Geef knew there was something back of that fool outburst, so he licked his lip thoroughly, and said:

"Go ahead, Tad, with that dang lie you was tellin'."

"It ain't no lie," declared Tad. "I was just thinkin' about Butch Bates. Have you ever saw Butch?"

"No," licked Geef, "but I've heard of him, same as I have of Paul Bunyan and them fellers."

"Hum," said Tad. "Butch is some different from Paul. They's some things they tell about Paul Bunyan that I don't believe, but they can't nobody lie about how bad Butch Bates is. He's six foot two in his socks, weighs a hundred and ninety, and he ain't got as much surplus flesh on his bones as a dyspeptic mosquito. He gets the name, Butch, down in Texas, when he kilt a braunk with his fist, and broke a bull's neck tryin' to bulldog him."

"Aw, hell, Tad. That ain't straight."

"Shore it's straight. I've saw Butch twice. Once was down on the old Dimunt J, in the Gramma Flats country, close to Deming, New Mexico. I was working for the Dimunt J when Butch signed on with the spread. He knowed he was bad, and advertised it. I seen him slap a braunk down with his open hand. He hadn't been there long, when him and me has a little run-in, and—I left pretty soon after that."

"Aw, hell, Tad. Whyn't you put ground glass in his coffee, or something? Him bein' big weren't no sign he couldn't be kilt. Still and all, I reck'n if he told me to hold his hat while he danced, I'd hold it, and he could see the nicks were my claws gripped it, ontel the hat was plumb wore out. Go ahead."

"Well, I hears afterwards that this Butch Bates starts West from the ranch where he kilt the braunk and broke the bull's neck, and has worked on every big spread in the cow country. Every place he went he kilt something, or somebody. He ain't ever notched his gun-handles, because the handles of two guns wouldn't hold the notches, and—"

"Gosh, Tad. Are you tellin' it straight, or just makin' up one of yo' fool yarns?"

"I'm tellin' it straight," said Tad, soberly. "The last time I seen Butch Bates, he was in Durango, Colorado. Butch drifts into the Old Tiger Head Saloon one night, with two guns and about half a jag on him. He lets out a yell that would scare a Crow Chief to death, jerks his guns and fires a coupla shots in the floor, and announces that he's a wolf, and it's his night to howl. In less than a minute, that Tiger Head place was empty, except for Butch, and he was behind the bar helping himself to drinks."

"Goshamighty," grinned Geef. "I'm shore glad I didn't live in them old times. Who kilt this Butch Bates?"

"Nobody kilt him that I ever heard of. They was right smart cow country in eastern Colorado in them times, and I'd been in there about a year, but I heared they was plenty of work here in Montana. I never did like to stay in one place too long, so I saddles and rides for Montana."

"I don't blame you none," licked Geef. "If it had of been me, instead of you, I'd of went so far north that the rabbits had to wear snowshoes."

Jake Olsen owned the Long O ranch, where Tad and Geef rode herd. Old Man Jake was six-foot-four, had a fist like a ham, and a voice like a fog-horn. Ranching was no romance to Jake, but cold business. The Long O brand was really more the shape of a link from a log-chain. Only one man had ever tried to run that brand into something else. A nester had settled in the upper end of Smoky Valley, and started a brand that he called a Double Long O. It was simply two links crossed, leaving a small square in the center, and looking more like the blossom of a wild-flower than anything else.

The nester prospered for a while. He had only a yoke of steers when he settled in the valley, but within six months he had a nice little home bunch of cattle. Those two old steers were too prolific to suit Old Man Jake. He investigated the nester's process of breeding cattle, and then he hanged the nester. No one ever tried to run the brand again.

Tad and Geef rode on to the ranch.

When they came in sight of the pens, they saw Old Man Jake standing at the gate talking to a man who was almost as tall as he was, and quite as well built. As the partners pulled up, they heard the big stranger say:

"Anybody can get along with me, Mr. Olsen. I'm bad, but I don't make no trouble when I ain't crossed none. I'm a cowhand. I know my stuff about cows, and it don't make no difference how tough a spread is, I can take care of myself." The gentleman had a couple of guns on him, and he glanced down at them as he spoke.

"Well," boomed Olsen, "I need another hand or two. I don't give a damn how bad you are, if you know which end of a cow the horns is on, and can keep up with one on a gentle horse. What's yo' name?"

"They call me Butch Bates," said the new hand.

When Tad heard that, his mouth fell open, and he stared at Butch as if he saw a ghost. Geef also looked at the newcomer, and because his eyebrows didn't show, Geef had a look of surprise and astonishment that could not be hidden by anything except a thick curtain. Butch gave them the once-over as they dismounted to unsaddle, and then shouted:

"Hello, Tad! How the hell did you ever find yo' way to Montana? Did you foller somebody up here, or just get lost and drift this far? Last time I seen you was down on the Gramma Flats in New Mexico. I recollect that I aimed to kill you, but you got away before I got around to it."

"I drifts up here from Wyoming," said Tad, meekly. "Been in here about a year, and—"

"That's all right," boomed Butch Bates. "I ain't holding the old quarrel agin you. I had too many others since then. Done forgot what we quarreled about. Anybody can get along with me, if he don't cross me. I've signed on here, and aim to show you boys how to handle bad braunks —and bad men, too, if any shows up. I—what the hell is that?"

"That's my pardner, Geef," said Tad, softly.

"Oh, it is? Well, he shore looks like one. Does he talk, or just make signs?"

Geef shot his red tongue out and wet his lip, then thought better of it and said nothing. It was just as well, for Butch Bates was not through talking, and he didn't like to be interrupted.

"How the hell do you keep from stepping on it, Tad?" grinned Butch. "Even a little feller like you is apt to step on a bug or something. If he's a pet, and can do tricks, you'd orter keep a string on him, let him ride on yo' shoulder, and wear a red cap. Do he bite so bad that you have to keep a muzzle on him thataway?"

Butch was going good, now. That was his main line of attack when he set in to subdue a cow outfit. He would bluff everything in sight, and inside a week he would have the foreman roping out his mount for him. He wound up to let loose another shot of derision at poor little Geef, when Old Man Jake bellowed:

"I hired you to punch cows, and not to entertain the hands by seeing how funny you can talk. Go on to the bunk-shack. The foreman will be in directly, and he'll tell you what to do, and when to do it."

Butch looked at Old Man Jake's hard blue eyes, opened his mouth to make a retort, then thought better of it. He turned and walked off toward the big log bunk-house, with the mental note that if that damned Swede thought he could put anything over him, he had missed his guess. He would have slapped him down then, but he had to work a month somewhere, and get a little

stake, before he headed south for the winter.

He decided he would take it off the old rascal for a while, but before he left the Long O, he'd square things, and square 'em good. As soon as he got a little stake, he meant to head back to Texas, where a man had a chance, and the boss didn't think he was a king. He was from Texas, he had his guns, and he knew how to use 'em. No wonder Old Jake Olsen kept a lot of off-color hands like Tad Lang and that half-witted partner of his. Probably Olsen wanted to be able to run 'em around like poor yearlings in heel-fly time. Just wait. Before he left, he'd take that Swede apart and oil him. He'd tell him what he was, and teach him how to treat a real cowhand.

"Tad," said Geef, in a low tone, as they unsaddled, "Old Man Jake has got that feller's number, and his goat with it. If he ever gets to crow-hoppin' around the Long O spread, the Old Man will just slap him down, and sit on his head until the boys put the leggin's on him."

"Listen, Geef. That's the first time I ever heard you talk that much without your lip bleeding, and if you don't look out you'll talk too much. I tell you Butch Bates is bad. He talks a lot, but he backs it up with them guns. If the Old Man ever tries to slap him— Well, he better not try, that's all. Butch is something of a slapper himself, and he's lightning with his guns."

"I reck'n you're right," said Geef. "You know this Butch gent better than I do. I'd like to see him and the Old Man robbed of their guns, and turned loose in a good cedar corral, to slap one another around."

"Geef, you are a good partner, and all that, but you ain't got hardly no sense. You ain't got enough sense to be afraid of lightnin'. I've saw you just sit humped up on yo' braunk, in a storm, and bat yo' eyes when the lightning was knocking gravel in yo' face."

"That was because I was skeered," grinned Geef, "and they wasn't nothin' I could do about it. No use runnin' from lightning. It can get you one place as good as another. Same way about this feller Butch. If he's bad, and we are all goin' to get et, why that's all they are to it."

"They's something that I can do about it," said Tad, "and if Old Man Jake hadn't been so white to me, takin' me on when I was broke, and he didn't need hands, I'd do it, right now."

"What would you do?" asked Geef, licking out his tongue and looking silly. "Would you just walk up to this Butch gent, and call him apart?"

"No. I'd fork my own braunk and hit the trail. Butch Bates talked fair enough to me, but he don't like me none. If he stays here a month, he'll kill somebody, and it's apt to be me."

"Aw, hell, Tad. He said hisself that he could be got along with if he weren't crossed. I don't aim to cross him none. He talked about me, and I didn't talk back. That's just his way of gettin' acquainted."

"Yes," snapped Tad, "and what you are saying is just yo' way of bein' a damn fool. If him and Old Man Jake is going to have a mixup, I wish they'd have it now, so the old man would fire him."

"They are apt to have it in the morning," grinned Geef. "You know what a fool Old Man Jake is about his horses. If Butch gets rough with his mount, the Old Man will crawl him like he was a log across a creek."

That was all that was said at the time. At supper that night, Butch Bates selected the seat at the table that he wanted, and sat down.

"That's my seat," said Lonnie Evans, a quiet, good-natured puncher, who would go a mile to keep out of trouble.

"You mean it *was* yours," snapped Butch Bates. "It's mine, while I stay with this cheap, jim-crow outfit."

Lonnie took another seat. The other boys grinned at their plates, and said nothing. Butch was running true to form. The Old Man had virtually called him, and he meant to take it out on the hands.

Next morning, Butch cut a mount from the free horses, and threw them into the remuda, which was in another corral. The spread was heading out that morning for a big drive in the upper valley. The hands were roping out mounts, and Old Man Jake was standing in the corral watching them. Butch swung the twine on a tough, roman-nosed old bronc, and started to put the bridle on him.

The horse knew Butch was a stranger, and perhaps instinctively disliked him. It pulled back, and every time Butch would start to ease the bridle on it would jerk away. With a roaring oath, Butch grabbed the beast by one ear and the under jaw, twisted its neck and threw it, then proceeded to set his knee on its neck and put the bridle on. He was in the midst of the performance when Old Man Jake slipped a ham into the back of his jacket collar, and jerked him to his feet.

"Lay off that rough stuff," bellowed Old Man Jake. "I have to buy horses, and I can get bush-horners anywhere. Better ones than you for their board. If you can't handle a horse like a human, saddle and ride from here."

"Oh, thataway," said Butch, with a nasty sneer on his pan. "I can handle 'em any way you say, and I'll do it, because I need a job just now, but—"

"Never mind any buts," rapped Old Man Jake. "If you want to work for me, take care of your mounts. Saddle and ride, now, with the rest of the hands. If you mistreat your horses, I'll find it out, and when I do—"

Old Man Jake didn't say what he would do, but his behavior that morning was a fair indication. Butch saddled his horse quietly, but he was boiling inside. He had seen some pretty good men in his time, but no one had ever handled him like a roll of bedding before. Never mind. His time would come. Jake Olsen might be a better man than he was, but he couldn't throw lead any farther than he could. Just wait until he got a little money ahead, and he'd settle with Jake.

Butch Bates was bad, all right, and he meant to put on a show, just as advertised. His first act, with Old Man Jake, had gone sour, but he was going to have that over before he left the Long O, and it would be different. Meantime, that gang of bush-horners that Jake Olsen called cowhands had better watch their step.

The big spread went clean to the head of Smoky Valley to begin work. That evening a considerable herd had been gathered, and thrown in a flat to bed. Leck Munson, the foreman of the Long O, was a little bowlegged Texan, with sun-squinted brown eyes, and a flowing moustache. He was sitting his horse near the rope corral, watching some of the boys rope out mounts for the night, when Butch rode up. His horse was in a bad plight, and Leck observed:

"Butch, you've rid that braunk pretty ragged today. I reck'n you must of forgot what Old Man Jake said about taking care of the horse stock, and all."

"No, I ain't forgot," snarled Butch. "When I work cattle, I work 'em. When I ride a braunk a day, he stays rid until I need him again a week later. When I do a day's work, I do a day's work."

"I ain't complaining about yo' work," said Leck, gently. "I'm just reminding you to take care of yo'

horses, like Old Man Jake told you to do."

"Yes," snarled Butch, "and I'm just reminding you to attend to yo' own damn business. When we get in, if Old Man Jake wants to look my string over and make any remarks about the way they look, let him do it, and see what happens! This is a good time for me to put you damned hay-eaters right about a lot of things. If anybody, and I mean anybody, tattles to Old Man Jake about how I ride 'em, he'll settle with me."

"Well, they ain't no use to get all hot in the collar about it," drawled Leck Munson, who was sitting with his hands on his saddle-horn. "I'm just tryin' to save you trouble."

"Oh, you are?" sneered Butch. "Well, trouble is my middle name, and I'll just make you some, right now." Butch's hand started for one of his twin guns.

"I wouldn't do that, Butch," said Leck, softly. "I don't want to kill you, and if you pull that gun—"

"You'll run out on me," jeered Butch.

"Well," drawled Leck, "if you want to see how fast I can run, go ahead and draw it."

"Now see here, Leck," blustered Butch, "they ain't no use in you and me havin' no run-in. You just as well get this straight. I ain't lookin' for trouble, but if anybody comes to me hunting the stuff, he can find plenty of it. I'm going on the first watch tonight, and every night. I do my sleeping late."

Leck made no reply. Butch dismounted and changed horses. Leck Munson was not afraid of Butch, of the devil, or anybody else. He just didn't want any more trouble than he had to have. If Butch had pulled his gun, Leck would have killed him, and Butch knew it better than Leck did. He had been called before, but he had never let any man get clean away with it, and he didn't mean for Leck to do that. He would watch his chance.

Tad and Geef were standing by when all that happened. As they rode on to camp, Geef said:

"Tad, I shore wish Old Man Jake had come with this outfit. I done found out that you are right about Butch Bates. He eats 'em raw. He's run it over Leck, now, and he'll take things apart from here on out."

"He shore will," said Tad. "He never worked anywhere that he didn't run the outfit, and plenty of times he has killed a man or two before they found out he meant it. He'll get some of us before he quits this job. I'd of gone to Old Man Jake and told him about Butch, but I didn't want him to think I was yellow. I had one run-in with him, and rode out of it, like I told you, but—"

"Well," said Geef, "they ain't no law agin you and me getting something the matter with our spleens, goin' to the ranch, and tellin' Old Man Jake that we ain't able to work. Then we can draw our pay, and ride, if you say so."

"I tell you, Geef, I don't like to do that. Maybe we can hang on until the spread gets back to the ranch. Then when Old Man Jake sees Butch's mounts, he'll fire him—if Butch can be fired. He can't unless he wants to be."

"Aw, hell, Tad. They ain't nobody that bad. If he gets rough with Old Man Jake, he'll pull his legs off, like he was a grasshopper, then hold him by the neck until he spits tobacco juice. I know Butch is bad. If he ever gets after me, I aim to run under a chip, or something."

It was when they got to the chuck wagon that Butch Bates broke out all over. He cursed the food, and then cursed the cook. The rest of the boys ate in silence, while Butch gave the cook orders about what the grub would be from then on. He had about exhausted the possibilities of cursing the cook, when he looked around and saw Geef grinning.

"Well, you damned ape," roared Butch. "Maybe you think because you eat hay, and any other mess that this misbegotten hellion of cook dishes up, I ought to eat it and like it. Straighten up that mug of yo'n. If you want to grin, get where I can't see you."

"Shore," said Geef, licking his lip. "I—I was grinning at something I was thinking about. I seen a yearlin' jump a bank today, and it turned clean over and lit on it's back. It sho' looked surprised when it got up."

"Oh, it did? Well you get this from me. Next time I ketch you grinnin' at me, you're goin' to look damn badly surprised when you get up. Pour me some more coffee."

Geef took up the coffeepot and poured Butch a cup of coffee. Then he went back and sat down by the side of Tad. As soon as Butch was through eating, he mounted and rode off to the herd. No one made any comment on the behavior of this bad new puncher. Old Leck Munson's face was as expressionless as a block of granite through the whole thing. Tad and Geef went off to their blankets, because they had drawn the second watch for the night.

"Tad," said Geef, "Hadn't we better saddle and ride for the ranch? That Butch Bates has decided to pick on me, and—"

"He ain't after you," said Tad. "He's tryin' to pull me into the mess. What he wants is a chance to kill me. He wouldn't jump a little feller like you. Just the same, I don't aim to let him keep on riding my pardner."

"Oh, let him ride," said Geef. "I don't mind it—much. Every body rides me about the way I look, and I'm used to it. Why, you do that yo'self. It ain't been a week since I taken my blab off one day, and you says, 'Geef, about four foot of yo' underlip is shore sore.' Then you told me to put my blab on, so's you could tell what I was, and find me."

"I know, Geef, but when I do that I'm joshin', and doin' it because I like you. Butch does it to drag me into the quarrel. I know I can't sling a gun with Butch, and I wouldn't last as long as a snowball the size of a pea in a hell as big as Texas, in a fist-fight with him."

"You shore wouldn't," said Geef. "He's a he wolf. I wish Old Man Jake would come to camp before morning. Just one look at the braunk Butch rode today would be all he'd need."

"Yeah," growled Tad. "That's a good wish, but it's about like wishin' for rain in the time of a big drouth. Old Man Jake had his team hitched up this morning, and driv off to town about the time we left. Let's go to sleep. We got to go on second watch." In a few minutes, Tad and Geef were snoring. They were still snoring when a mighty hand caught Geef by the collar and jerked him up standing, as he fought to get his eyes open and see what it was all about.

"Come out of the hay," roared Butch Bates. "Think I'm goin' to stay on herd until daylight? If you can't wake when you ought to, you better bring along a nursing bottle and a cradle on the next drive. Out of it, you bush-horners, and get on the job."

Tad crawled out of his blankets. He knew it was coming to a showdown with him and Butch, and coming pretty soon. It was nothing to be pulled out of bed to go on watch. Plenty of prankish cowboys pulled that stunt, but Tad knew what Butch was working up to. What he didn't know was that the shaking that Old Man Jake had given Butch, and the calling that Leck had administered, had set Butch crazy to do murder on some one. It had revived Butch's old hatred for Tad, and he was determined to bring it to a gunplay.

It was the next morning that it happened. Butch roped his mount, and began to abuse it. The horse reared and plunged, and Butch couldn't get it up to where his saddle lay.

"Geef," roared Butch, at the little puncher who stood near, watching the battle between man and horse, "bring me my saddle."

Geef just grinned at him, and all the boys who were near got set for a mess. Tad's lips drew into a straight line. He was on his horse, and Geef was on the ground. Geef's red tongue shot out and wet his lip good, before he said:

"You go plumb to hell, you big four-flusher. If you can't saddle a braunk, get you a rockin' chair."

"Why, damn yo' impudent little soul," roared Butch. "I'll crumble you up and put you in my pipe and smoke you. Bring me that saddle, before I—"

"Listen, Butch," said Geef. All the boyish whine had gone from the little puncher's voice, now, and the other men watched him in amazement. "I ain't goin' to bring you nothin', and that ain't all. Maybe you can run a blind calf over the rest of this outfit, but if it tries to jump me, it'll fall on its back, like that yearlin' I told you about last night."

Butch dropped his rope and started for Geef, reaching for his gun as he went. The next thing anybody knew there was smoke, and Butch Bates was not making all of it. In fact, he didn't make but one little spurt, and he had a bullet through his middle when he did that. When the smoke cleared away, Geef was calmly shoving fresh cartridges into his gun.

It was after they had buried Butch, that Tad said:

"Geef, ain't—ain't you afraid of nothin'?"

"Shore I am. I was afraid Butch Bates was goin' to pot you. That's why I called him and kilt him. I reck'n you and me will have to do his work on this drive. Come on, let's ride."

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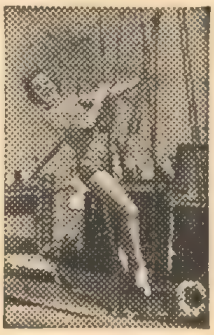

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BOOTS AND SADDLES

By

E. W. THISTLETHWAITE

You Will Sense The Romance Of Leather And Appreciate The Worth Of A Good Saddle When You Have Lapped Up This Authentic Article, Written And Illustrated By A Man Who Sits In A Kak Today And Looks At Beef Critters For A Living.

In our last article, if you remember, I made a sketch of a real Mexican saddle. I didn't have space enough to say anything about it, but I promised to illustrate an old Texas saddle this time and compare the two. The Texas saddle was, of course, developed from the Mexican, and it is interesting to trace this development down to the present day.

I expect that few of you realize the extent to which we are indebted to Mexico for almost everything we call "western" — our equipment, saddles, bits, ropes—even our methods of handling cattle and horses. Why half the *words* we use are Mexican, like *mecate, ramal, aparejos, tapaderos, rosaderos, bastos, cantinas, concho, rodeo, arroyo, cañon, sombrero* and a hundred others.

The American cowboy originated in Texas and California, but he did not grow full-fledged overnight. He *developed* over a period of years, and his model was the Mexican vaquero from across the Rio Grande (pronounce that "grandy" by the way). The Texans even adopted the name "Vaquero" and the American "cowboy" did not come into general use for many years, cow "puncher" being a still later development. Some of the other terms, such as cow "poke," "waddie" and the like, were, as far as I am able to find out, coined by fiction writers. Certainly, I never remember hearing them until quite recently and you rarely if ever hear cowboys use them now.

Pancho Villa rode this saddle and its type is still generally used below the border. This article tells you why it is used.

Those first Texas cowboys must indeed have been a crummy looking proposition. There were no Stetson hats, no fancy high heeled boots. Their saddles, brought from the Southern states, were nondescript and of every conceivable pattern, most of them quite unfitted for range work.

Just across the border, however, rode the Mexican vaquero in all his glory of jingling spurs, immense sombrero and all the rest of it, and these Mexicans were cowboys in every sense of the word. They rode wild horses and branded wild cattle, and the equipment they used was adapted to the work.

It is only natural that these Americans who undertook the business of raising cattle under the same conditions as they were raised in Mexico, should adopt the dress, equipment, methods and even to some extent, the speech of the Mexican vaquero.

Mexico is unprogressive and the vaquero of today rides the same kind of outfit and breaks horses and works cattle just as his grandad did before him and *his* grandad did before *him!* Americans, on the other hand, are just the other way—always looking for something to improve and it is with this improvement, as far as it applies to saddles, that we are at present concerned.

In order to save you trouble of digging up the October issue of All Western, in which it appears, we are re-printing that drawing of the Mexican saddle mentioned above. It is, Fig. 1, a gen-u-ine Mex. hull, as it was in the beginning, is now and, I expect, ever shall be—or maybe "will be" would be more grammatical!

I guess the first thing that will strike you about this saddle is the immense size of the horn. A cumbersome looking thing it is, awkward to take hold of when stepping onto a horse and practically useless to hang onto if you're trying to stay on top of a bucker. It is a bear, however, when it comes to roping, for, being so big around, a single turn about it will hold a rope as solid as three or four turns on the horn of a modern American Stock Saddle.

Another distinguishing feature is the large saddle pockets behind the cantle. Pockets of this same general design are sometimes built on American saddles, but American pockets are not more than half the size. Even at that, they are a damn nuisance and flop continually as you ride. It is possible, of course, that a big pocket may stay down better.

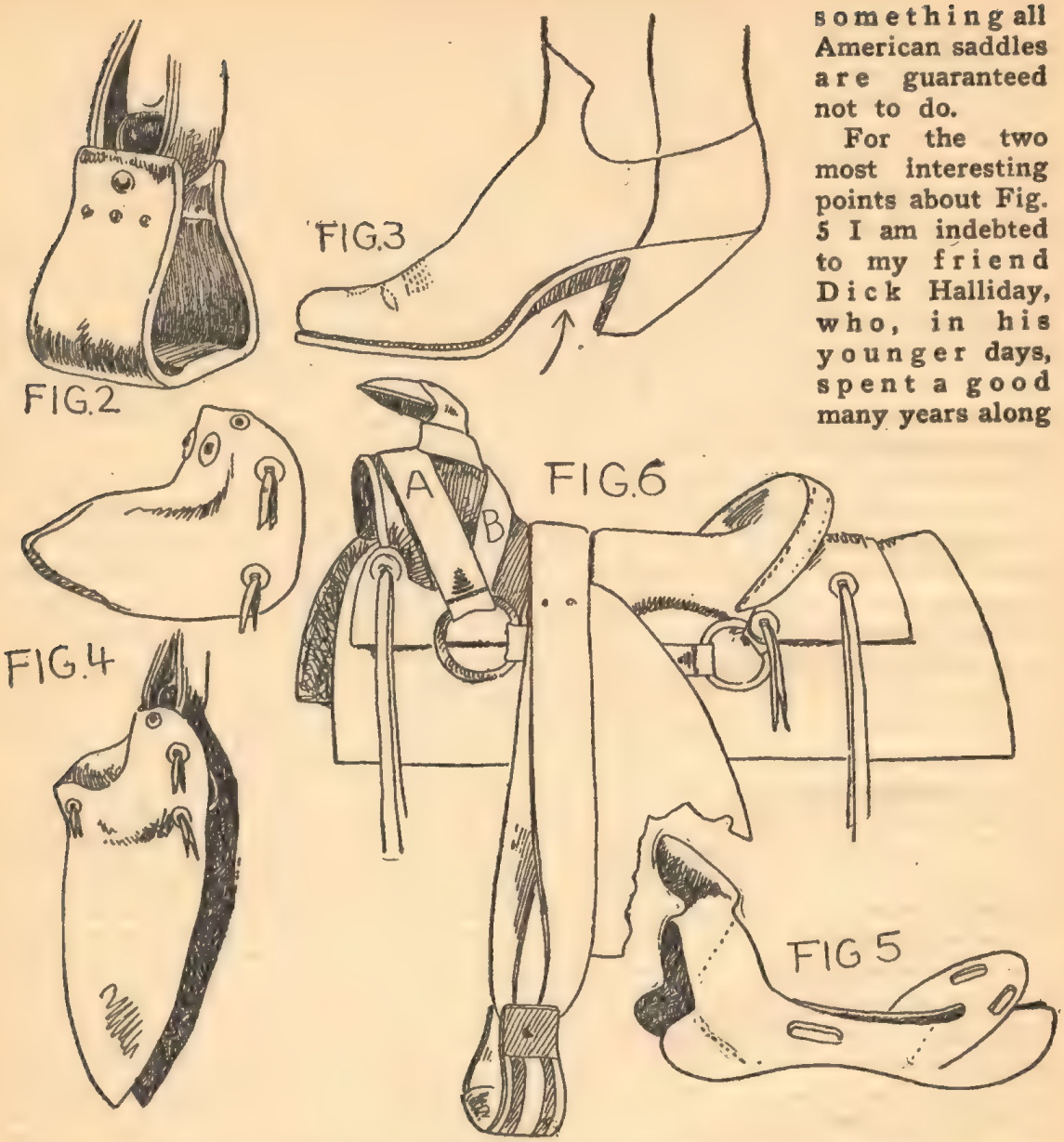
Next let's take a look at the square box stirrups. Note how short they are and wide. I never have seen quite this pattern stirrup on an American saddle, but wide stirrups were in general use in Texas in the early days and in California also. In California, of course, the Mexican influence is still strong, although all vestige of such influence has long passed in Texas.

I think that in California the stirrups attained an even greater width than they ever did in Mexico. I don't know exactly the limit to which they were made, but I can vouch for four, five and even six-inch stirrups. A pair about five inches wide is shown in Fig. 2. These are very rare now, the treads of modern stirrups usually not exceeding two inches and grading down to less than one inch.

Strangely enough, I came across a pair of these five-inch stirrups the other day—the first I've seen in nearly twenty years. They were very heavy and bound with iron, yet one of them was crushed out of shape, evidently by a horse falling on it.

The chief advantage of a wide stirrup is that you can rest your weight on it without hurting your feet. The modern cowboy boot, however, is made with a very heavy, rounded shank (Fig. 3), and as long as the boot "stands up," a light weight, narrow stirrup is just as comfortable and a great deal more convenient.

Getting back to our Mexican saddle, it might be mentioned that in a brushy or thorny country, the stirrups are often covered with short "bulldog" taps similar to those shown



Be sure and refer to all of the above sketches when mentioned by the author. Fig. 2 is an extra wide stirrup. Fig. 3 is a cowboy's boot, showing reinforced arch construction. Fig. 4 shows two types of tapaderos, the shorter, or "Bulldog" Tap, and the longer or more common. Fig. 5 is a Mexican saddle tree and Fig. 6 is an old Texas saddle, evolved from the Mexican.

something all American saddles are guaranteed not to do.

For the two most interesting points about Fig. 5 I am indebted to my friend Dick Halliday, who, in his younger days, spent a good many years along the Texas-Mexican border. They are those slits you see in the bars and in the back of the cantle.

The former are for the stirrup leathers, of course. I know of only one American tree that was—and perhaps still is—made with these slits, and that is the Morgan tree. It is largely a kid's or a dude's tree. Usually, of course, the stirrup leathers are merely run through between the bars.

in Fig. 4. The long tap shown below is of the type most common in this country.

The tree (shown in Fig. 5) is quite similar to the American design and is made of the same materials—wood, covered with rawhide. The bars, however, are usually of inferior design and poorly attached to both fork and cantle with the result that saddles built on these trees are notorious for causing sore backs—

As for those slits in the cantle, they are left that way after the saddle is made up and are used as hand holds when riding a pitching horse. This particular feature is not universal by any means, but the fact that some Mexican saddles are made with them is interesting because it is evidently the origin of our own "Cheyenne roll."

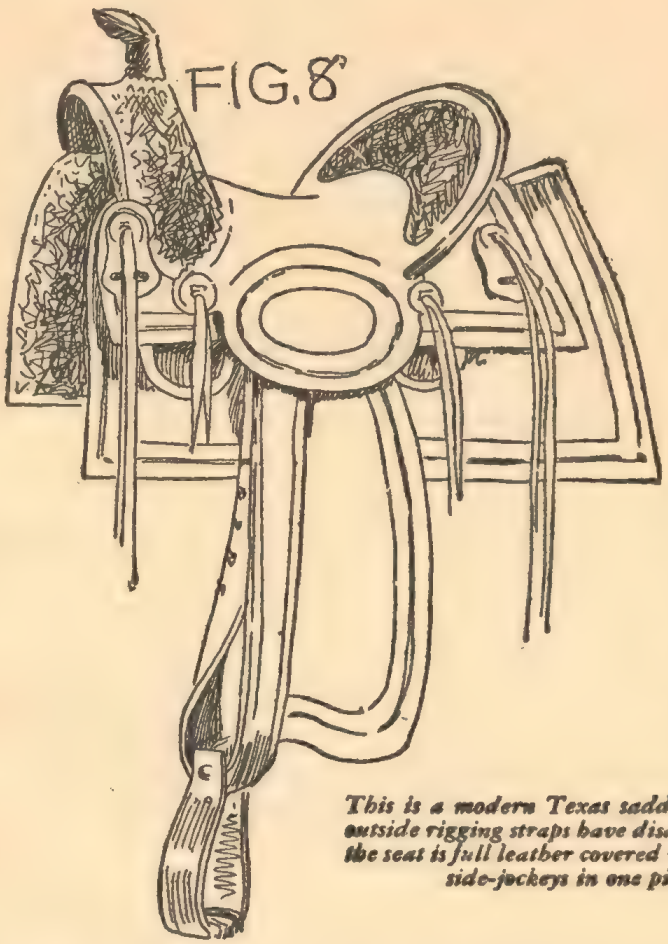
Another peculiar feature of the Mexican saddle is the fact that the fork and horn are left uncovered with just plain rawhide over the tree. American saddles are occasionally made that way today, but only for riding bronks. A regular stock saddle for everyday riding is always full leather-covered.

I think the only other point we need take note of is the Spanish rig (see Fig. 1). This is a single rig for one cinch only and that set away up in front. Note especially the way the rigging rings are attached. One strap through the arch of the fork and another running back of the cantle.

The Spanish rig has just one thing in its favor—it will hold a saddle when you're riding down hill. Otherwise its about the poorest rig you can get, especially when the rings are attached as described above. Apparently, however, it is the only rig that Mexican saddles are ever made with. Certainly I've never seen one with anything else.

Well, so much for that. Now for our Texicans again.

As I have indicated above, the early Texas cowmen adopted the Mexican equipment and methods *en masse* as you might say, and these included the big horned saddle, the spade and ring bits, the long, rawhide braided rope and with it, the system of "dallying."



This is a modern Texas saddle. Note that outside rigging straps have disappeared and the seat is full leather covered with seat and side-jockeys in one piece.

For some years everything went fine; then came Santa Ana, the Alamo, the Texas Republic and with them a fierce contempt and hatred for Mexico and all things Mexican.

It may have been that or merely the restless Anglo-Saxon craving for change and improvement. Perhaps it was a little of each—anyway, the long rope gradually disappeared and with it, of course, the custom of "dallying." Texas became the first "tie fast" country. Also the spade and ring bits gave place to the light "grazing bit" so typical of Texas today. The old "gourd" horn saddle,

like we show in Fig. 1 was improved and refined and the horn was leather-covered, although still made of wood.

I have been unable to find out just when the iron horn came in—it was long before my time, although as a kid I remember seeing wooden horn saddles. It is probable that many saddles were made on old type trees long after the iron horn was introduced just as today slick fork saddles are still made, although swell forks have been the rule for over twenty years.

Be all that as it may, I think I'm safe in saying that iron horn saddles of the pattern shown in Fig. 6 were in general use in Texas as far back as the '80's. I guess that's far enough back for anybody anyway!

At first glance, this Texas saddle, barring the horn, does not look so different from the Mexican. It has the same low, slick fork, long seat and low cantle. The rigging, however, has been changed from Spanish to double, this being accomplished merely by adding another cinch.

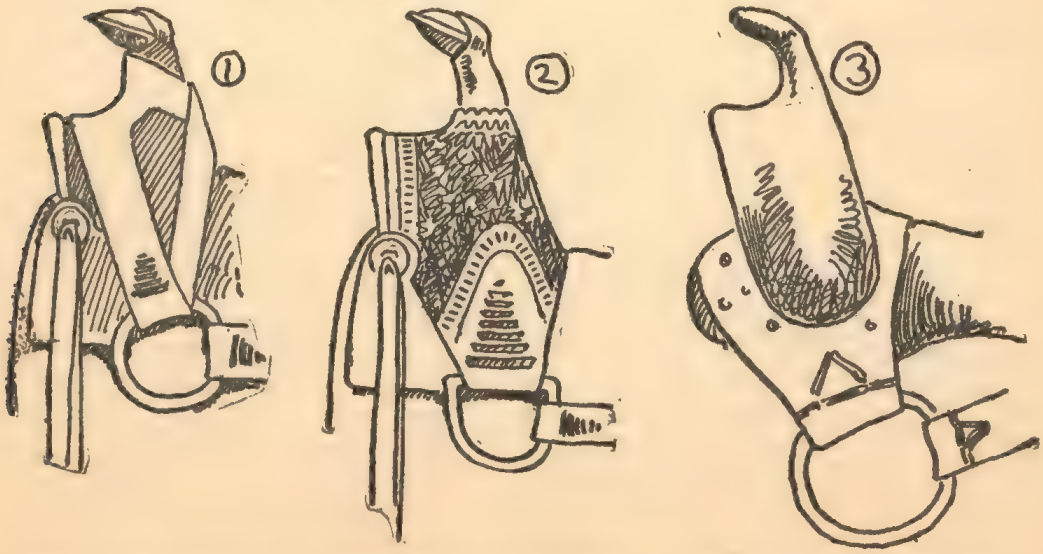
The reason for this change was the fact that the single Spanish rig was found impractical for tying fast, and when the long rope and the system of dallying went the Spanish rig, of necessity went too.

Not only did the Texans add a flank ring, they found a new and much better way of attaching the front rings as will be seen in Fig. 6. Instead of each ring being fastened independently, they were joined together by a wide strap (A) running over the fork in front of the horn and a narrower one (B) which is passed once around the horn.

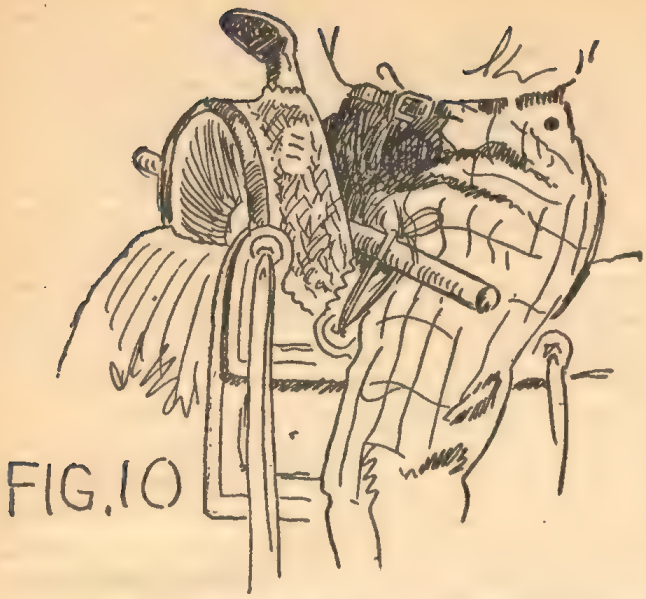
It was in saddles of this type that the men rode who trailed the big Texas herds north to Kansas, Colorado and the Montana-Wyoming territory and west to New Mexico and Arizona. Wherever ranches were established in these states, Texas cowboys stayed to run them and that's how the double cinch and the short rope came to be used all over the range east of the Rockies.

Only in California, Nevada and to some extent Oregon, did the Spanish or Mexican influence survive and it shows to this day in our silver inlaid bits and spurs, our long rawhide riatas and our methods of handling stock.

FIG. 9



These saddles show the various hitches used in building in a rigging strap. In (1) the strap around the horn is one piece. In (2) the Fork cover itself is used as a front rigging strap. In (3) the rigging straps are screwed or nailed to the saddle bars.



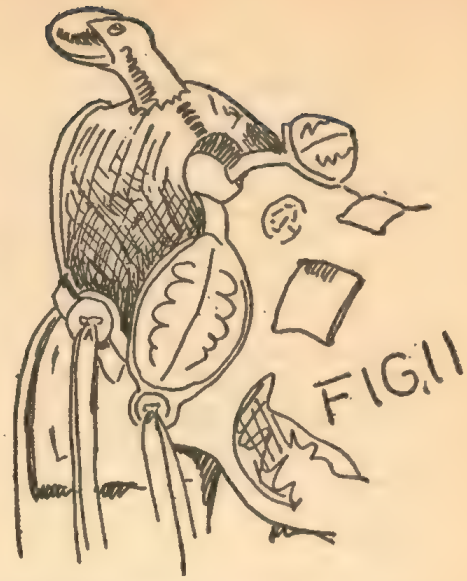


Fig. 10 shows an improvised bucking-roll as sometimes used before rolls were built into the saddle. Fig. 11 shows the original bucking-rolls as tied onto the saddle. They made it harder to fall out—but still too easy.

The advent of the 20th century brought with it several more improvements to our Texas saddles, chief among them being the full leathered-covered seat, with seat and "side jockeys" in one piece (see Fig. 8). Previous to this, side jockeys had been added to some saddles but they were merely stitched or tacked on and were of little benefit although they did add somewhat to the appearance of a saddle.

You will also note in Fig. 8, that the outside rigging straps have disappeared—an improvement found on saddles made as long as forty years ago, although old-time outside rigging straps were used on some saddles as late as 1915.

Speaking of riggings, quite a few changes have been made from time to time as shown in Fig. 9.

On the left is an outside rig very similar to the one shown in Fig. 6, except that the strap that goes over the fork and the one that goes round

FIG. 13

Fig. 12, from left to right, shows the development from the old "flat" saddle to the built-in swell. Fig. 13 is the extreme "form-fitter" type for taming the bad ones. The saddle below Fig. 13 is the "Association" style, official saddle for all contest riders.

the horn are in one piece. This is sometimes known as the "Sam Stagg" rig and, strangely enough, is being revived today.

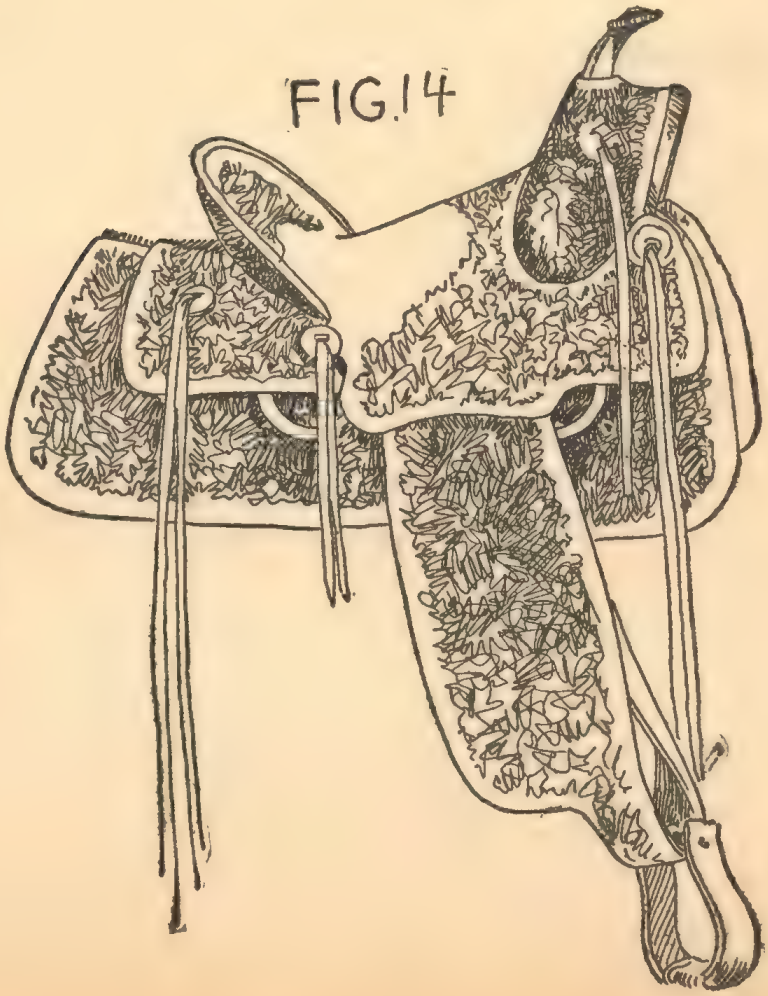
In some old-time saddles, I have seen the fork cover itself used as the front rigging strap. A device both neat and strong but which, for some reason was never very popular (see 2, Fig. 9).

On a modern saddle, even one with a wide or undercut swell, the rigging strap is often run over the fork, under the fork cover of course, so it does not show. On some makes the rigging straps are merely screwed and nailed to the bars as shown in No. 3, Fig. 9. This latter system makes a somewhat poor appearing job, but such riggings are turned out by reputable saddle makers and are guaranteed not to jerk out.

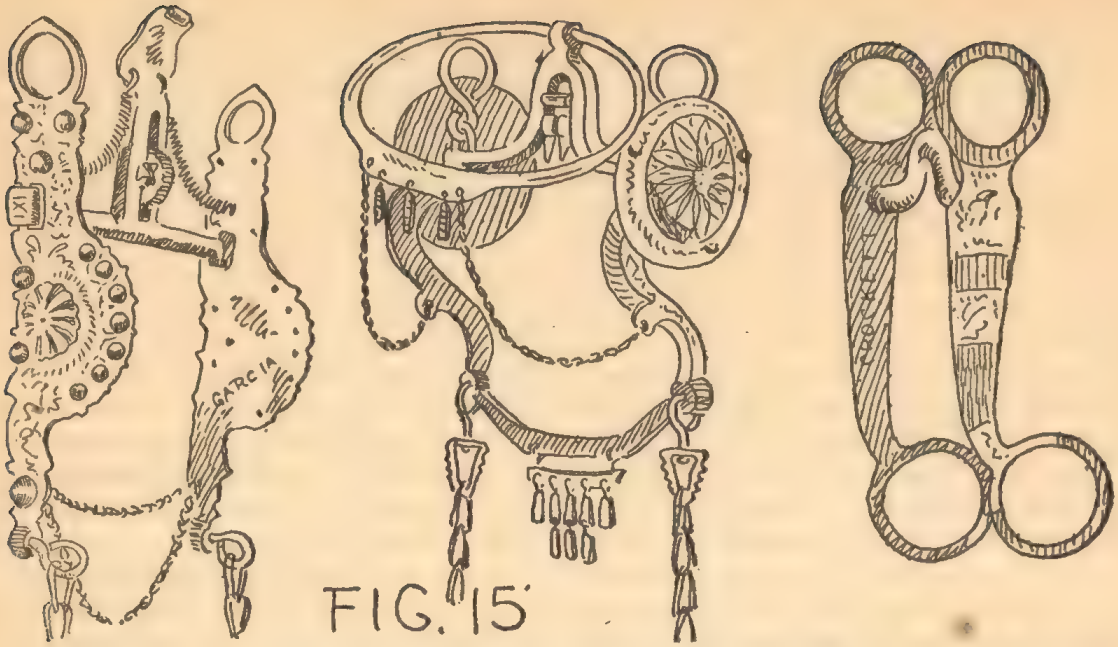
The next improvement which came, in my part of the country, along about 1911 or 1912, was the swell fork. This was designed to make it easier to stay on a bucking horse and, incidentally, to take the place of the detachable "bucking rolls" which were occasionally used on slick fork saddles to aid the rider in staying on top.

It is rather interesting to trace the development of the swell or "bulge" as it is called in the north.

In the early days, a pole or sometimes a tightly rolled blanket or slicker was tied across the forks of a saddle as shown in Fig. 10. Later, this system developed into the bucking-roll—a leather pad, stuffed with hair, some three or four inches high, which was tied down on each side of the fork as shown in Fig. 11. It is



A thoroughly modern Texas saddle. The addition of the old flat-top Mexican horn (not in this illustration) to this saddle is a fad which is gaining popularity.



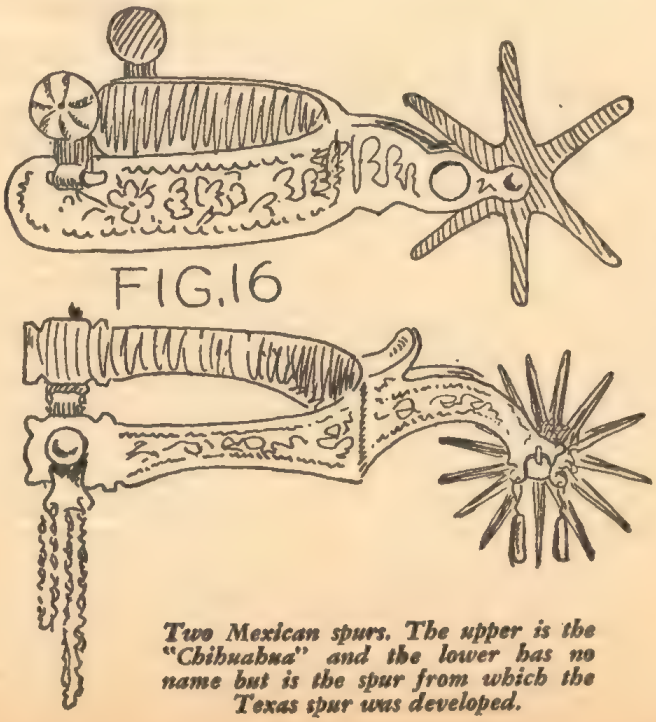
Horse jewelry is this. Left to right: A spade bit, a ring outfit and the "Texas" bit. This last-named is most generally used now in all states east of the Rockies.

surprising that it should take saddle makers some fifty years to think up so obvious and simple an improvement as the built-in swell.

When they did think of it they made up for lost time and in a very few years were turning out "bronk" saddles that it was next to impossible to get thrown out of. Fig. 12 shows how these swells were developed.

At first, any kind of saddle was allowed in the bucking contests. Then the width of swell was limited and finally undercut swells—which meant all "bronk" saddles—were disallowed altogether, and a medium swell, fourteen inches wide was adopted. This new tree being designed by, or at least *for* the Rodeo Association of America, was named the "Association" and it is this tree that all contestants in bucking contests have to ride today. The difference between one of the exaggerated bronk fighting swells and the Association is shown in Fig. 13.

One of the later improvements, or perhaps we should say "refinements," is the one-piece stirrup leather and fender and the one-piece side and front jockey.



Two Mexican spurs. The upper is the "Chihuahua" and the lower has no name but is the spur from which the Texas spur was developed.

These, together with the button top nickel horn are shown in Fig. 14, which may be taken as the last word in the modern "Texas" saddle.

It is a curious fact, but after a widespread craze for saddles of the bronk or "form fitter" type, lasting some ten or twelve years, the pendulum seems to be swinging back. Half the new saddles you see, especially at rodeos—where the latest styles always make their first appearance—lack not only a bronk swell, but any swell at all worth mentioning!

There is even a tendency, in roping saddles, to swing back clear to the old Mexican type of horn, which was one of the first things to be discarded! This old-time horn on a thoroughly modern saddle, like the one shown in Fig. 14, makes quite a striking combination.

Well, I guess that's about enough of that. I didn't intend going into the subject quite so fully, but once I get started talking about saddles I take quite some time to run down!

I had figured on getting round to packing this month. That's something most every cowboy knows a little about, particularly in the Southwest and all over the mountain country, but I think we'll have to let it go till next time, as that's another subject I'm kind of long-winded on. Right now, I think we'll just string along with "first one thing and then two" as the feller says, till our time's up. O. K. with you?

I believe that some place above I mentioned about the early Texans adopting, along with the saddles, the Mexican spade and ring bits. In case some of you don't know just what these implements look like, I've made a sketch of them here (Fig. 15). The spade is on the left, the ring in the middle and the "Texas" bit—the kind they use now in most states east of the Rockies—on the right.

In regard to the spade, I could say quite a little, as it is our own California specialty, but my amigo Dick Halliday is preparing a long spiel about it for Ace-High magazine, I believe. I promised him to lay off the subject. I might mention, that as a bribe, Dick gave me some pointers on the Mex. saddle I've been talking about!

I don't think much need be said about the ring bit. The ring, of course, goes round the horse's lower jaw, making the bit rather a severe one unless it is handled carefully. It is decidedly not a bit for the man who loses his temper and goes to jerking his horse around. Note the "janglers" on the ring and lower bar.

The Texas, or "grazing bit" as it is sometimes called, is a good all-round light-weight bit. You can't "set a horse up" with it, like you can with a spade or ring, but it is ideal for the Texas method of riding and handling stock. It is too, the only bit for the inexperienced rider.

In Fig. 16 we have a couple of Mexican type spurs. I don't know any particular name for the lower one, but the upper is known as the "Chihuahua" spur (pronounce that Chee-wa-wa). It is evidently from this latter type that Texas spurs were developed, for they are made heavy, of one piece and with wide heel bands. A typical example is shown in the upper drawing of Fig. 17.

The genuine Chihuahua spur is often a beautiful piece of workmanship, inlaid with silver in the most intricate designs, even to the spokes of the rowels. Texas spurs, by contrast, are very crudely mounted (not inlaid) with German silver and bronze, but they are good spurs for rough work.

There is a tendency now to make these spurs out of "silver steel," a bright rustless metal something like the chromium on automobile radiators. This, however, it seems to me, is far from being an improvement,

as it renders the mounting indistinguishable from the rest of the spur. I mention this in case some of you happen to be thinking of ordering a pair. Regular tool steel turns brown in a short time and the mounting stands out prominently.

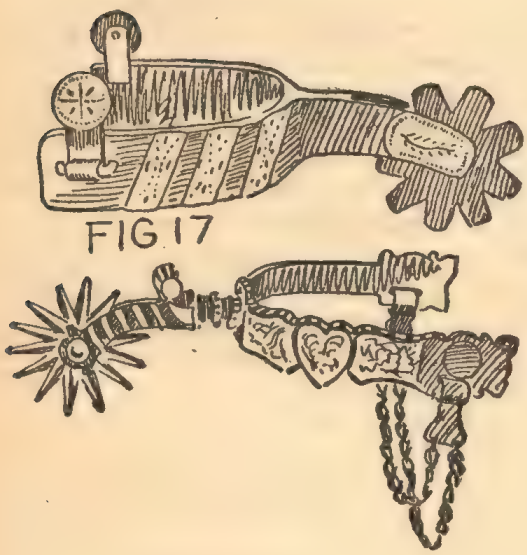
Our second drawing, Fig. 17, shows a modern California spur, practically the same in design as the other Mexican spur shown in Fig. 16, only minus the janglers. These spurs are not peculiar to California, by the way, being used in Nevada and Oregon and occasionally in states east of the Rockies. They are, however, typical of the Pacific slope, as the Texas spur is typical of the plains.

I guess we shouldn't talk about spurs without mentioning the kind of straps that go with them.

In Fig. 18 we show first the kind of strap usually worn with the Texas type spur and below it, a California strap with a silver "concha." In each case the buckle is worn on the inside of the boot.

Contest riders, by the way, almost invariably wear Texas style spurs with narrow straps, one of the most popular styles for several years now being known as the Paddy Ryan (named after the contest rider). Just to round out this article I'll make a sketch of this Paddy Ryan spur on a typical, low cut, contest rider's boot.

Well, folks, I haven't got quite as many *words* in this article, but I think I've made up for it in drawings so I guess its about an even break. Adios!



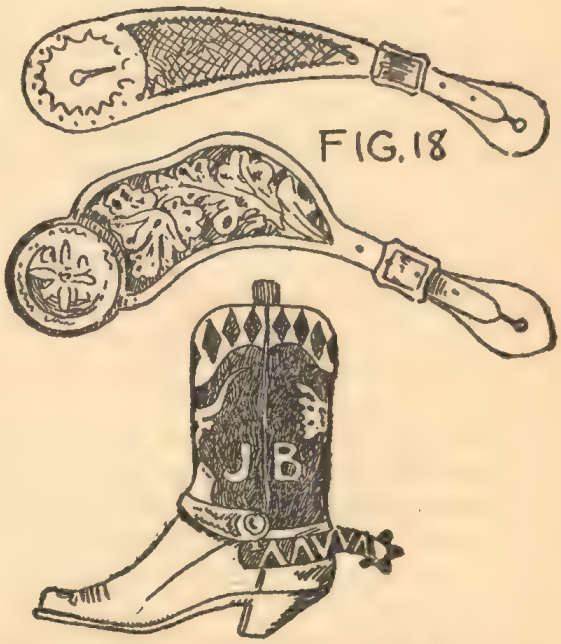
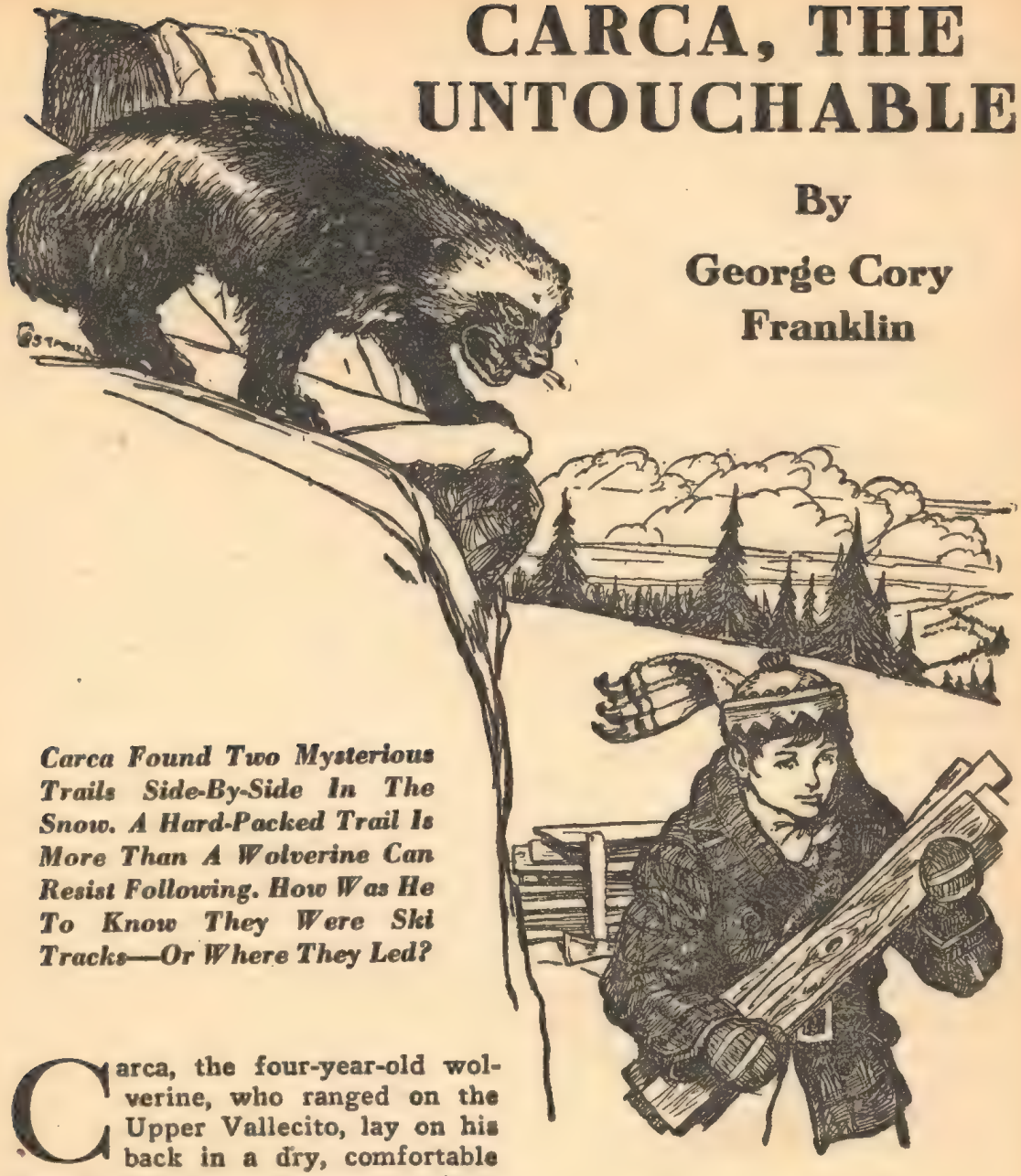


Fig. 17 (upper drawing) is the modern Texas spur, roughly made for rough work and not overly decorated. The lower one is a modern California spur. This model is more elaborate and popular on the Pacific Slope. Fig. 18 shows the kind of strap usually worn with the Texas spur, and below is the California strap. In each instance the buckle is worn on the inside, as shown by the boot.

CARCA, THE UNTOUCHABLE

By

George Cory Franklin



Carca Found Two Mysterious Trails Side-By-Side In The Snow. A Hard-Packed Trail Is More Than A Wolverine Can Resist Following. How Was He To Know They Were Ski Tracks—Or Where They Led?

Carca, the four-year-old wolverine, who ranged on the Upper Vallecito, lay on his back in a dry, comfortable den, thinking up some new prank to play on the trappers of Five Rivers. If the bear is the true clown of the forest, then Carca might really be called the Mephistopheles; for if ever the supreme motive of any creature was mischief, Carca was that creature. In fact, the French Canadians make the wolverine synonymous with devil, and cross themselves religiously when they encounter his tracks, in hope of protecting their camps from his sportive acts.

To one ignorant of the disposition of this, the largest of the weasel family, he would have appeared to be very much like an undersized shepherd dog, as he rolled around in the dry leaves upon which he had made his bed. His brownish-black hair, marked with two lighter colored stripes, which began on either side of his neck and faded on his hips, was very much like the fur of a shepherd. His short, powerful legs resembled those of a dog more than they did a weasel's, and he got much the same enjoyment out of tearing

up objects belonging to men, that a pup does in worrying an old shoe. Here, however, the likeness ended, for Carca would fight double his weight in wild cats, and give the cats the first bite.

As Carca roamed through the woods all creatures of anywhere near his own weight avoided him. Even Woof, the black bear, and Lobo, the wolf, pretended not to see him, if either of them chanced to come upon him accidentally. As for any of the cat tribe, or Carca's cousins, the martens, they simply quit the country in disgust if they discovered the wolverine had moved in.

In spite of his reputation, Carca was not such a bad fellow, as wild animals rate. He killed only for food and has been known to pass up game when he was hungry, in order to wreck the trap line of a man who destroyed a hundred lives for profit, to the one Carca sacrificed in order to live. Only the week before, Carca had worked hard and traveled many miles, in order to spring every trap set by Pierre Maurier, the half-breed. Then, having found the cabin of the trapper, he had squeezed through the small square hole Pierre had left for a window, and thoroughly enjoyed himself by wrecking that camp more completely than he had ever wrecked one before.

When Carca crawled out through the square hole again he more than ever resembled a dog that had been in mischief. His long, silky fur was daubed with a mixture of flour, molasses and corn-meal. He had broken a bottle and tomato catsup and smeared a long red mark from the top of his head to the end of his nose.

Whiskey-jack, waiting outside for his share of the loot, gave one look at Carca, nearly fell off the limb on which he was perched, uttered a squawk which plainly meant: "What-the-hell?" and flew away.

Carca hid in a nearby thicket of juniper and heartily enjoyed the uproar Pierre made when he returned just before dark. The only articles that had not been harmed were such tin cans as the wolverine could not get between his powerful jaws. Pierre was forced to go out to the trading post for fresh supplies, and he spread the news of Carca's depredations throughout the Five Rivers country, loudly proclaiming, "I will kill that carcajou if I do not trap anything else this winter———no, not even so much as a squirrel."

Heavy snows, which fell shortly after Carca had raided Pierre's camp, had prevented the trapper from tracking him, and had also limited the activities of the wolverine. Because of the shortness of his legs, Carca was a slow traveler, and was forced to wait for the snow to become crusted, so that he might walk on top of it.

During the time Carca had been kept in his den, he had become thoroughly rested. He would have liked to know whether Pierre had restocked the cabin or not, and still more he was interested in the trap line.

Carca rolled over two or three times, stretched and got up. He went to the door of his den and looked out over the gulch below. On the level snow at the bottom of the gulch was a queer looking track, the funniest one Carca had ever seen. He couldn't figure out what sort of a creature could have made two straight lines parallel in the snow.

Any trail had a strong fascination for Carca. He ambled down to the tracks for a closer inspection. Stranger even than the shape of the tracks was the fact that there was not the slightest scent of any kind about the marks. Carca walked along the tracks for a quarter of a mile wondering what strange beast had made them. He was as familiar with the tracks left by Pierre's web snowshoes as he was with those of rab-

bits, but this was the first time he had ever seen the marks made by a Norwegian ski.

Some strange creature had certainly passed this way. Carca could not tell by the tracks which way it had been going, but because it was a trail and the walking was easy, he followed it miles across a wide expanse of wind-swept country above timberline, through Hunchback Pass and far down into the forest on the Rio Grande side of the range. Thus, Carca left the trapping country of Five Rivers and came into the mining country in the vicinity of a new camp that was being opened on Lost Trail Creek.

About midnight he came to a well-built log cabin, very different from the squat affairs built by the trappers. No chance for mischief here, because the windows were protected by shutters made of boards. He found a piece of beef that had been thrown out on the dump by Ole, the camp cook, on which he made a highly satisfactory meal.

Carca still did not know what creature had made the queer tracks, but since they had led him into a land of plenty, he felt disposed to let that pass.

There were more than a dozen cabins in the camps. Trails connected them and led up the mountainside to various tunnels dug into the solid rock, around which lingered a queer acrid smell that puzzled Carca as much as had the ski tracks. This was the wolverine's first experience with dynamite, and he instinctively disliked the smell.

Carca spent the remaining hours of darkness in tracing out every one of the trails about the camp. One that led down to the spring wielded him the first drink of water he had enjoyed for weeks. After the gripping cold had ice-locked the streams, Carca ate snow for moisture the greater part of the winter. An open spring protected, as this one was, by a shelter of logs was a luxury that would bring joy to the heart of any fur bearing creature.

Carca's long claws made no distinguishable marks on the hard-packed snow, and because of his strange obsession for following trails he did not leave any signs in the unbroken snow about the camp.

With the first hint of dawn in the east, the wolverine selected an abandoned prospect tunnel, the only workings where there was none of the offensive smell of dynamite, and curled up for the day. He had chosen the one place that would not be visited daily by the miners. The wind had kept the dump free from snow, and here again natural causes favored the wolverine, because he left no tell-tale foot prints on the frozen ground over which men passed a dozen times during the day.

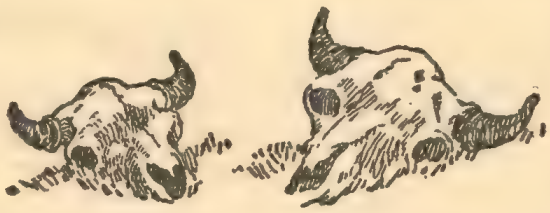
Fifty feet back in the darkness Carca discovered a pile of sawdust, where a packing box had been opened. This made a wonderful bed, of which he promptly took possession. Carca certainly approved of this camp. There seemed to be an inexhaustible quantity of food on which a not too discriminating scavenger might feast. There was an abundant supply of clear, sweet running water and a warm home. What more could he ask for?

During the day Carca did not leave the old tunnel and when at last he did come out onto the dumps, he saw bright lights sending long shafts of illumination out across the trails, over which he had intended to pass. Carca growled and drew back into the darkness of the tunnel. Perhaps he swore a little and may have thought:

"Of course there would have to be a hitch somewhere. I might have known it," for Carca had seen the evidence of the one and only thing on earth that he feared——fire, and he was inclined to quit the place at once.

An hour later the wolverine crept cautiously to the edge of the dump and looked again. Instead of the angry growl with which he had greeted the light, he gave a surprised grunt of satisfaction. Not a light showed in any of the cabins. Carca waddled down the trail to the first garbage dump and feasted on the shank of a ham that had been thrown out. Having finished that he followed a strong scent until he came to where Ole had dumped a pile of soup bones. When he had finished with these, he visited the spring, took a long drink, and was about to start back to his warm bed in the tunnel when he saw two glaring green lights directly in the path he intended to pass over.

There was but one creature in all the Five Rivers country who possessed eyes like that, and Carca knew the answer. Only stark starvation could have driven old Whisperfoot, the cougar, to approach this near to cabins inhabited by men; and when Whisperfoot was hungry enough to take such a chance, he was indeed a desperate and dangerous enemy, one that even Carca did not care to cross. However, it is against the nature of a wolverine to show fear, and Carca knew the advantage of a good bluff. He snarled a blasphemous oath, that for viciousness cannot be duplicated in the whole animal kingdom, and started slowly along the path, straight for the spot where Whisperfoot stood, spitting and growling like an enraged alley cat.



Translated, the conversation must have meant something like this:

Carca: "Get out of my trail you mangy such-of-a-such, or I'll rip your guts out for the campbirds to feast on."

Whisperfoot: "Oh yeah! And what will I be doin' all that time? You bench-legged, cross between a weasel and a striped cat."

The question of odors is a sensitive one with all members of the weasel family, even the beautiful martens have a touch of it. Anyway, such a reference to his person doubtless fired Carca's rising temper, and he flew at the slender neck of the cougar.

Whisperfoot dodged gracefully and raked the long, sharp claws of his right paw along Carca's side, leaving three crimson gashes. But before the cougar could make his customary leap into the branches of a tree, Carca had turned and fastened his teeth in the muscles of Whisperfoot's hind leg. The cougar screamed and, turning over on his back, flailed the air above Carca's head. Occasionally one of his blows connected, and several patches of brown fur floated in the air above the fighters. Carca merely shut his eyes and took a beating while twisting and tearing at the tendons of the cougar's legs.

How long the struggle might have lasted or what the outcome would have been is highly speculative, had not Scotty MacGregor, hearing the racket, opened the door of his cabin. Behind him, Annie, his wife, held an oil lamp high so that its beams lighted across the trail on which Carca and Whisperfoot fought. Scotty's old 12 gauge shotgun roared. Flame spurted in the direction of the fighters and hot pellets stung them.

Scared nearly out of his wits, Whisperfoot tore from Carca's loosened grip and ran in long loop-like bounds for the nearest tree, while Carca, dashing away in the ditch made by the trail, escaped unseen to his bed in the abandoned tunnel.

For a few nights Carca nursed his cuts and bruises; in the daytime, if there were no disturbing sounds, he

went out onto a nearby ridge and lay in the sunshine, instinctively seeking the healing rays.

It was on one of these trips that Carca, looking down into an open space a short distance from MacGregor's cabin, saw a small object that interested him greatly. The object of Carca's interest was six-year-old Sandy MacGregor, the small Scotsman, who was the center of attraction to every man in the lonely winter's camp. Sandy being a manly little chap amusingly imitated everything he saw his elders do.

Carca had seen several men, mostly swarthy faced half-breed trappers. They had seemed like gigantic creatures to the low swung wolverine. Little Sandy, however, was but a few inches taller than Carca, yet except for stature he was an exact replica of the huge Scotty, and an object of intense interest to the wolverine.

One day when Carca was watching Sandy chopping wood with a small axe, Scotty came up from the mine where he was working. He picked Sandy up and swung him high to a seat on his shoulder. Now Carca understood. Sandy was a man-pup, and like the young of all other creatures was harmless. Since he could not hurt Carca, and there was no reason to fear him, Carca felt no enmity toward the man-pup.

This is the true and perfectly logical explanation of the mystery surrounding the action of many wild creatures toward human children. Where there is no fear there is no desire to injure, consequently little children are seldom molested by wild creatures, and instances have been recorded where animals have actually protected them. The rule holds good, except among those rare beasts that have acquired a taste for human blood. These killers make no distinction among old or young, big or little, and such a killer was Whisperfoot.

Two years before he had come upon a wounded trapper, had licked up a pool of the salty, human blood and thus intoxicated, had killed and eaten the man. Now he was hanging about the little mining camp, risking dangers that no other cougar on Five Rivers would have dared, for the purpose of killing and eating human flesh.

Of course Carca knew nothing of all this, he supposed that Whisperfoot had been tempted by the garbage piles, the same as he had been. Carca even preferred the variety of food to be found around the cabins to freshly killed meat. While the cougar's lust was for hot blood as it spurted from the veins of a victim.

The wound Carca had inflicted upon Whisperfoot kept the cougar from renewing his hunt for some time. Largely dependent upon the driving power of his hind legs for the darting springs, by means of which he catches his prey, Whisperfoot had to wait until his wound healed before he dared to again invade the camp. Consequently Carca had forgotten the existence of the cougar, when he again resumed his nightly trips along the trails leading to his feeding grounds.

There had been some speculation among the miners as to what had ailed the cougar on the night MacGregor had fired at the beast. The tracks of the big cat in the blood-stained snow had been plainly seen, but because Carca had moved but a short distance before he struck Whisperfoot and had left the spot immediately after the fight, by way of the hard packed trail, he had no distinguishable marks for the men to find.

That there had been a terrible fight was undeniable. Everyone had heard the screeching and caterwauling, but because they found only the tracks of mountain lions, the miners decided that there had been a family

quarrel, and that the fight had been between two cougars.

Again Carca got a break. Had any of them suspected that a wolverine was living in the abandoned tunnel and daily watching the precious Sandy for hours at a time, Carca's retreat would have been dynamited at once. One night Carca's foraging yielded but little. The reason was that the cook had been busy and failed to empty the cans as usual. It seemed as though the supply of food must have suddenly been shut off. For the first time since he had come across Hunchback Pass, Carca went back to his bed hungry.

In the morning he lay on the rock beside his tunnel and watched the men go to their various jobs. Shortly after, Ole, the cook at the main camp, carried the cans he had forgotten to empty the night before, out and dumped them beside the trail. The smell of food intrigued Carca. He looked up and down the narrow valley. No humans were in sight. There really was no reason that Carca could see, why he should go hungry until night. He waddled boldly forth, followed his usual trail and soon was gorging himself on the food Ole had thrown on the snow.

The sun shone brightly. There was no sound except the scolding of two whiskey-jacks, they having been driven from the food pile by Carca. But after a little while, Carca heard a peculiar tapping sound. It seemed to come from a willow patch a few yards from MacGregor's cabin. Carca's curiosity moved him to investigate. Keeping well down in the ditch made by the path, he trotted along the trail until he came to the willows, and there saw the man-pup at work, in imitation of his elders, making a small house of logs.

Sandy had not seen Carca. The wolverine was an expert at the art of camouflage; the browns and grays of his coat seemed to merge with the rotten log behind which he had approached the spot. Slowly he sank back until only the top part of his head and two small black eyes appeared.

The little boy, proud of his skill with an axe, was fashioning a door in the little cabin he had built of easily cut aspen saplings. Carca had never before witnessed the actual building of a house and he forgot all else in watching the man-pup. Sandy chopped and fitted his logs, as he had seen the men do, utterly unconscious of the fact that less than a dozen yards away lay a great, brown, ferocious creature, whose known presence would have thrown the whole camp into a panic.

When the booming blasts at noon warned Carca that the men would soon be coming up to the cook house, he sped quickly up his trail and into the tunnel, but thereafter he divided his waking hours in the daytime between the food pile and watching Sandy at play. He actually came to have a sort of proprietary interest in the playhouse, as he saw it grow under the industry of the sturdy little Scotsman. This was the state of affairs when Whisperfoot, having entirely recovered from his wounds, again came to the edge of the cliff above the camp to reconnoiter.

It was ten o'clock of a bright winter morning, a thin column of blue smoke arose straight from the chimney at the end of Scotty MacGregor's cabin, where Annie, Sandy's mother, was preparing dinner against the return of Scotty from the mine, and Sandy from his playhouse.

Whisperfoot had seen nothing of interest as yet. His long tail swung back and forth gently, like that of a cat exploring a room which might yield mice. Suddenly the tail stopped straight behind the cougar, his muscles froze into rigidity as he bellied lower in the snow. Something was moving in the willows beside what appeared to be a tiny log cabin. A moment later Sandy stood up

straight, and Whisperfoot saw the boy. The cat's green eyes became mere slits, saliva drooled from his jaws, and he gave a low, fierce growl.

The stalk began at once. The cougar taking advantage of a split in the cliff down which he slid to the forest below, from here he worked cautiously along the foot of the rock until he came to a pile of timber, cut the fall before for use in the mine. He was now out of sight of the houses of the camp, and could investigate more leisurely. Nothing could have been more to the liking of a cowardly cougar than the scene before Whisperfoot.

Fifty yards distant beyond an abundance of cover which Whisperfoot could easily reach, the lion saw Sandy MacGregor at work making furniture for his newly completed cabin. To a hunter of the cougar's experience, speed and strength, the kill would be so easily accomplished. All that was required was a little care in crossing one open space, a silent stalk behind an old rotten log, and one swift spring. Whisperfoot would race back up the mountain carrying his prey. Already Whisperfoot could almost taste the hot blood of his unconscious victim as he began his skillful, creeping stalk towards the old log.

Annie MacGregor took two pies from the oven and placed them on the table to cool. She remembered that she had failed to keep her promise, given to Sandy several days before, to come and see the wonderful new cabin. She threw a shawl over her head and ran lightly along the trail, a distance of a hundred yards. She had reached the edge of the willows and was about to call a happy greeting to her small man-child, when she caught sight of an object that froze her blood. The long, tawny body of a cougar crouching behind the end of the log not twenty feet from where Sandy sat whittling a brace for a table he was making.

Probably no more terrifying sight ever greeted the eyes of any mother. Annie attempted to scream, but made only a little gasping sound that could not be heard the distance of a yard. She lost all power of locomotion.

Whisperfoot was drawing up his muscles for a mighty spring. Annie could no more move than could a bird held in the hypnotic power of a snake. Her sight began to dim. She was about to faint. Then a miracle happened. The log behind which Whisperfoot had chosen to make his sneak was the very one, where for several days Carca had been coming to watch the man-pup at work.

The wolverine had scented his old enemy when Whisperfoot was coming down off the cliff; later he had heard a twig snap. Carca had been a famous hunter himself, he knew what Whisperfoot was doing, and understood all the details of such a stalk, and it was his instinct to interfere. The wolverine was not moved by any altruistic motive; in fact the opposite was true. He hated the cougar for the pains Whisperfoot had caused him. Besides Carca had preempted this camp and all that was in it. In a way the man-pup belonged to him. If the cougar thought he was going to come here and kill game right under Carca's nose——— well, he had another think coming.

Carca timed his blow to a fraction of a second. At the very instant when the cougar sprang, the wolverine struck straight up and sank his fangs in the long yellow throat with such force that Whisperfoot plunged into the snow, fully a yard to the right of his intended victim.

The unexpected intervention by another wild creature so shocked Annie as to break the paralyzing nervousness. With a shriek of agony that echoed back from the sides of the cañon, she rushed to where Sandy sat, grabbed him up in her arms and

ran out into the trail, just as Scotty and two other men, who had happened to be outside after timbers, came running to learn what had caused her scream. Annie could only sob with the terror of her awful nightmare, and point toward the crimsoning snow over which the two wild creatures fought to their death.

Carca's blow had been as accurate as a well aimed bullet. He had made but one snap and then had sunk his teeth home, set his powerful jaws with bulldog tenacity and hung on in spite of the bucking convulsions of the cat. In vain the cruel hind claws of the lion cut the body of the wolverine. Failing to loosen Carca's grip, Whisperfoot sprang high in the air, twisting and plunging about, dragging the lighter body of his antagonist with him; now burrying Carca out of sight in the snow, now throwing him with terrific impact against the logs of Sandy's playhouse. But nothing could break the hold of the wolverine. It was as though jaws of steel had been melted about the cougar's throat.

At Scotty's summons, Ole came carrying MacGregor's gun. Scotty would have fired straight into the melee, not caring which one of the fighters stopped the charge, but Annie restrained him.

"No, no, Scotty," she pleaded, "dinna kill the wee beastie, it was him saved our laddie from being torn to bits by the cat. If he lives to win this fight he deserves to go his way for what he has done this day."

Scotty listened to his wife's sobbing description of what Carca had done, and while he had an idea that perhaps the wolverine had been hunting Sandy, too, and that the animals were fighting over which one should make the kill, still he was a fair minded Scot. Partly to please and console Annie, he held his fire.

Whisperfoot's plunges were less furious now. Carca's strangle hold was proving effectual, but it was not until the tawny body of the big cat had ceased to twitch that Carca released his hold and stood for a moment snarling at the group of humans, as though to warn them against following him, and then staggered off up the trail to the only refuge he knew———the old abandoned tunnel.

Carca had lost much blood, his flesh was in some places stripped from the bones. He presented a pitiful sight as he dragged himself painfully up the ridge and onto the dump at the mouth of his home.

That night the wolverine suffered in silence, back in the darkness, but shortly after daylight the fever in his wounds drove him to start toward the spring. With great effort he forced his battle-scarred body toward the light. The scent of man came to him, and he drew back snarling, but mingled with the offensive odor there came also, the smell of food, and what was still more wonderful that of fresh water.

After a few minutes' careful watching, Carca went out to the dump and there he found an old wooden mine bucket filled with water. Beside it was a pile of bones and scraps of meat. The men at last solved the mystery of the unknown scavenger that had been working over their garbage dumps, and had been persuaded by Annie to bring food and water to the animal that had unquestionably saved little Sandy from a horrible death.

Carca found life much easier from now on. He did not have to go down to the cabins at night. Each morning the old bucket was filled with fresh water and there was always an abundance of food at the mouth of the tunnel. As the days grew warmer he lay on the dump and watched Sandy playing in the dooryard or by the little cabin that had been moved up to a spot where it might always be under Annie's watchful eye.

One day as Carca stood up to

stretch himself he saw Pierre Maurier come out of the MacGregor cabin. Pierre glanced up the side of the mountain and saw Carca. Whatever the miners might think of Carca, the trapper had not forgotten his robbed trap lines nor his wrecked camp. He slipped back inside the cabin for a moment, when he reappeared he held the long, heavy rifle that Carca remembered in his hands.

The trapper steadied the weapon against the side of the door and hugged the stock up close to his cheek. Suddenly Annie MacGregor appeared beside him. She saw Carca on the dump and realized that only a fraction of a second lay between life and death for the wild creature that had saved her man-child from Whisperfoot. There was no hesitancy about Annie's actions now. She brought the heavy water bucket in her hand down on Pierre's head with such force as to cause the rifle to drop to the ground.

"You'll no be shootin' my wee beastie," she remarked with finality. "He's doin' you no harm and you can just take your pack and be on your way back to your own country. It's a filthy business, anyway, trapping wild things."

Carca did not know why Pierre had not shot nor why he swore as he walked off toward Hunchback Pass; but he had a feeling that from now on, life would be easier. He even began to think again of a mischievous trick that he had been considering just before the fight with Whisperfoot had occurred.

Next morning when MacGregor's men tried to start the blower which forced air into the lower levels of the mine they found the intake pipe clogged with the dish towels that Ole had been hunting for since breakfast. MacGregor looked up at the dump that was now recognized as Carca's own. He saw a pair of shining black eyes watching him from behind a rock. MacGregor laughed and waved the dish towel at Carca, as a sign that he did not object to a friendly joke.

The Cactus City Department

VOL. 11 No. 31

A GOOD STORY BUT PROBABLY A DIRTY LIE

Cyclone Turns Animal Trainer If, We Can Believe Him

Now, I'm going to tell you this piece of news just exactly like I heard it, without venturing no opinion about its truth. All of you folks know that Cyclone Simon is a mighty salty and hardy sort of gent, as well as being a hell of a liar, so there is just a chanct that the story is on the truthful side. Cyclone keeps a mountain lion at his ranch for a pet, you know. He got it when it was a kitten, but it is full growed now and as mean as a roman-nosed roan. Daytimes Cyclone lets it wander around loose, but night times he puts it in a cage in order that nobody will sue him account of being killed by a wandering pet lion.

Well, right in the middle of the other night, Cyclone was woke up by a terrible commotion in the corral. The horses was whinnying and the dogs was barking and whining like they had been eating peach pits. So Cyclone went out to investigate, and he found that the cause of the ruckus was the dang lion, which evidently had got out of the cage. Cyclone called the cat, but the critter wouldn't come; it just kept sulking and slinking around the corral, with Cyclone getting madder and madder every minute account of stubbing his toes and cutting his bare feet in the gravel and stones. Finally he got completely exasperated, and he made a dive for the lion, managing to grab the cat by the tail. Because he was sore and wanted to teach it a lesson to stay in the cage nights, he cuffed it and kicked it and generally beat hell out of it. Then he drug it back to the cage and started to shove it in, but—Lo and Behold! His pet lion was already in the cage! The one he had just beat up on was a wild one.

Now that's the story, and you can take it or leave it. All I got to say is that Cyclone *Has* got two lions now, cause I seen them, and neither one has got trap marks on it.

Announcement

Fandango Ferrel of the Blue Moon announces another rule for the patrons of his place. Hereafter, only slick-heeled gents will be allowed on the dance floor. Lately there has been too many boys get spurred in the calves of their legs, and there is always a question whether it was accidental or not. With spur-wearing barred, there'll be a lot less fights take place.

BEARD MYSTERY IS NOW SOLVED

Miser McDonald's Secret Out After Twenty Years

The reason why old Miser McDonald wears long whiskers has been discovered. Some twenty years back, Miser borrowed a couple of hundred simoleons off'n a gent to buy feeders with. When the note fell due, old Miser kept stalling off the gent, promising to pay him later. This went on for a long spell, then one day when Miser had just eased himself into a barber chair and got lathered up for a shave, this gent busted up and demanded that Miser pay up right now, immediately.

Pretty impatient, Miser said couldn't the gent even wait until the barber got through, and the gent answers "yes" he'll wait, but as soon as Miser got through being shaved he'd have to pay. Whereupon Miser hopped up from the chair and wiped off the lather before the barber could even get started. And for twenty years he's been letting his whiskers grow just to get out of paying that money.

JOKER JAMESON IS NEW JUDGE

Policy Proves Judge A Gent Of Wisdom and Sense

Because Judge Mott suddenly resigned, the Town Council had to appoint a new Judge. There was considerable competition for the job, but evidently Joker Jameson offered the best price. (Unofficially I'll tell you that the price was a pair of Justin boots for each member of the Council.) Anyway Joker is the new judge, and when asked for a official statement he said the only rule he would commit hisself to was "Circumstances Alter Cases."

Now, that's what I call a right smart motto. A judge can't be expected to have a lot of iron-bound promises to live up to—or to live down. Sometime he might have to try a friend of his on the same charge that he has just tried some hombre he didn't have any use for. In such a circumstance he couldn't hardly deal out any justice, so it looks like Joker's policy proves that he is a gent of wisdom and foresight.

PROVES ABILITY

In the first case that he heard, Joker proved that he has a keen and able mind, and that he ain't going to be misled by a lot of unnecessary details or any fancy talk. His first decision was in the case of Trigger Truman, who was charged with shooting a Mexican. Trigger testified that he was only target shooting at cans, so claimed the killing was an accident. Joker accepted this alibi and acquitted him, but there was some argument brought up as to what kind of cans Trigger was shooting at. The new judge squelched this mighty quick.

"Everybody will admit that Trigger was shooting at cans,"

(*2nd Col. Next Page*)

EDITORIAL

It ain't long until the Tenth Annual Tri-county Celebration is due to be pulled off, so I want to take this opportunity of reminding the citizens that this here event is aimed to promote Democracy and Peace and Goodfellowship.

There will be horse races and steer riding and calf roping as usual. The bar will be set up in the same place—in that grove of cedars at the west end of the meadow, and the women-folks are reminded to keep their kids out of six-gun range. Sheepmen and their families will be allowed a space on the north slope, and they better stay where they belong. Texans will be allowed to mingle with the respectable citizens, though I'm hoping something will be done about this by next year; it seems to me that Texans ought to be given a separate place, maybe on the south slope by the Mexicans.

Everybody should turn out for this big event and enjoy theirselfs. Eat, drink and be merry and above all things remember that this is a day of Peace and Goodfellowship. And that is what I want to say a few words about mostly. I want to ask that all you quick-trigger gents quit fighting among yourselfs and save your smoke for when it will do the most good. Last year Cactus County made a hell of a poor showing when the free-for-all busted loose at the end of the day. Now of course I ain't anticipating any big gun battle like has come off every single year so far, but you know how them cantankerous curly-tails from the other two counties are; they ain't satisfied until somebody knocks the chip off'n their shoulders and a general fracas is begun. So we got to be prepared for anything. So why can't you rannyhans save your personal quarrels until we show those other two outfits where to head in to? Last year fourteen Cactus County men was laid up before the general brawl was even started. That's bad, cause we need every fighting man to uphold the dignity of our county. So use your heads, and save your lead for Caliente or Brimstone County men.

PERSONALS

When Blow-hard Black, Superintendent of the Indian Reservation, was in town the other day, he was puffed up like a grass-fed horse. It seems that a squaw at the Reservation gave birth to quadruplets recently, and Blow-hard could talk of nothing else. From the amount of bragging he done, anybody would think that he himself was responsible for the unusual occurrence.

That hombre is so anxious to talk about hisself that he'd probably boast about it if he had diabetes.

Peek-a-boo

The day after the Mammoth Carnival and Sideshow had played here in Cactus City, Wagon-tongue Tom dropped into the Gazette office wearing a wise look on his face. Pretty soon he announced that the Bearded Lady in the sideshow wasn't no female at all. (He didn't say how he found out, But I saw him after the show peeking through a slit in the dressing room tent.)

Dead And Gone

An unidentified stranger was planted in the cemetery last Friday shortly after he had opined, out loud, that Jackass Jake must have got his nickname from his looks, not his profession.

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he said, "and that's alibi enough. I don't see how the details can change the facts. It don't make no difference whether he was shootin' at bean cans or tomato cans or Mexi-cans. Case dismissed"

ROMANCE BUSTED

Milk-cow rancher gets the gate

All the folks who have been expecting that T-bone Tillie and Jerker Jenson would team in double harness are going to be disappointed to learn that it is all off. Jerker, who helps Ole Larson run his milk-cow ranch, has been sparking with Tillie for some months now, but all he has to show for it is a black eye. He won't explain how come he got it, but Tillie ain't so backward; she admits having hung that shiner onto Jerker account of what she calls his "barn-yard behavior." When asked to explain that, she said well, there is certain things which a milk cow will stand for but which a lady will object to.

BARGAIN SHAVES AIN'T A SAVING

Yearling Barber's Services Come High

Cross-cut Kane of the Gem Barber Shop and Baths now has an assistant. It is his boy, Cut-throat Kane, who is being educated in the fine art of barbering. In order to give the boy some practice, Cross-cut announced that for every time his boy took a slice off'n a customer, why five cents would be deducted from the price of the shave.

When Bull Billings got a shave yesterday, he came off forty-five cents to the good, but he allows it ain't hardly worth it. When he got home his wife accused him of getting cut up in a brawl, so Bull had to buy her a dollar box of candy to quiet her down. So the shave really cost him 55c., not counting the pain and the wear and tear on his face.

CARD OF THANKS

Citizens of Cactus City, I thank you for your foresight in electing me mayor. From now on our progress will leave Mesa Springs behind like a burr on a horse's tail—which it is.

My first official act is to remind you that this city is twenty years old. Some of the buildings standing behind the houses (and I don't mean woodsheds) is still standing on their original excavations. Twenty years over one digging is plumb too long. I want to see every man strong enough to stand this kind of work out swinging a shovel pronto. Them that wants lumber or carpenter help (and has cash to pay for it) can find me at my lumberyard. BROAD-AXE BOYLE.

"I guess you're the guys," said High, and punctuated his remark with blasts from his six-gun. Short joined in the chorus.

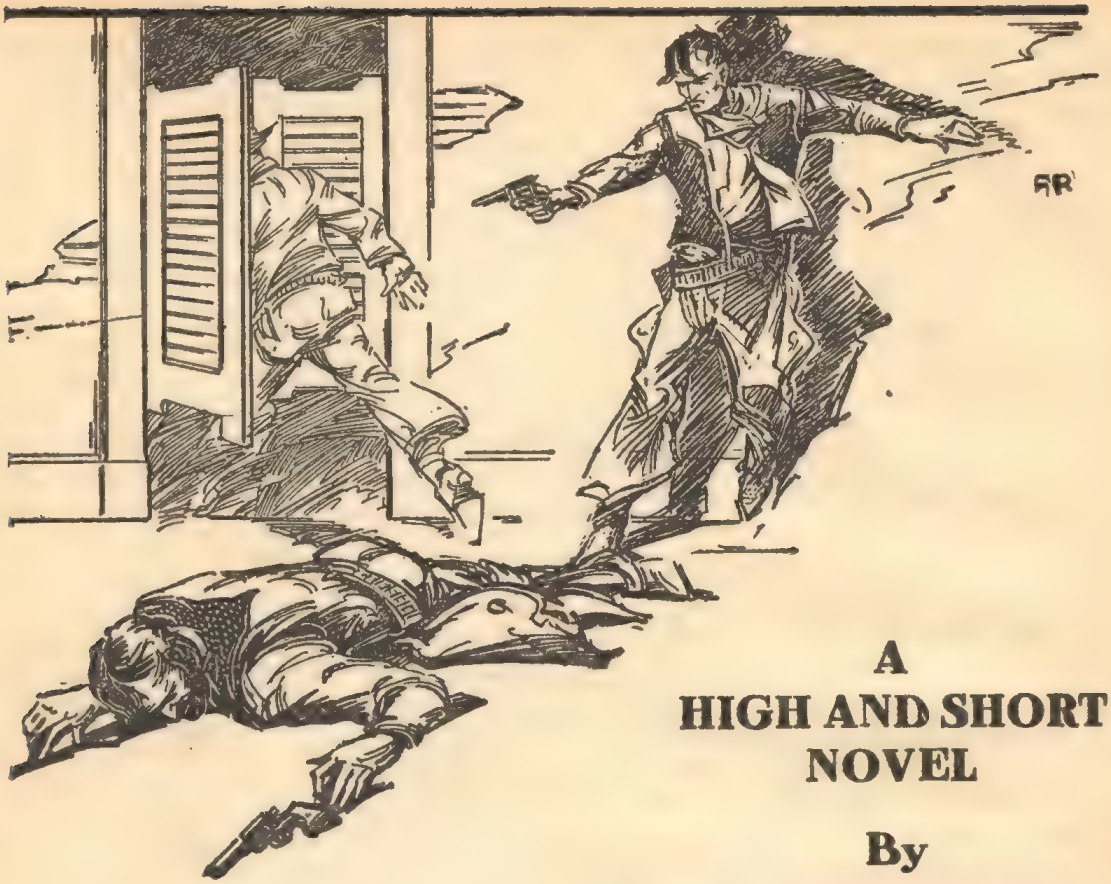
GAMBLER'S LUCK

High and Short sat their horses out under the stars. They were on the last night-herd before the big string of long-horns were to be delivered at Dodge City, Kansas. The night was clear, and the great, pendant stars seemed to hang almost to the earth. It was a night for quiet meditation and deep thought. The cattle were sleeping like tired children, and the night wind was murmuring in the tall grass. No word had been spoken for many minutes, as two cigarettes glowed in the darkness. At last, Short broke the silence with a deep, heavy sigh, and said:

"Hiram, son, I went to school some, when I was a boy."

"Hell you did," grunted High. "Nobody would ever find it out, if you didn't tell 'em."

"You mean," snapped Short, "that you never would find it out. You



A HIGH AND SHORT NOVEL

By

J. E. GRINSTEAD

Forty Years Man And Boy, Short Had Invested His Pay Checks In Poker Without Getting Dividends Or His Money Back. Then Came The Night When He Filled Four Aces And A Royal Flush—And High Filled His Hands With Six-Guns.

ain't got nothing to find it out with. You're so damned iggernant that you can't tell a educated man when you see him."

"I got sense enough to know that you can't see education," declared High, "but what of it? I ain't never held it agin you because you could read and write, and maybe cipher a little. What made you think of it?"

"Hiram, son, I been in a thoughtful mood for several days. I've tried to be a good pardner to you. I've talked to you about the error of your ways, as earnestly as ever a well-fed preacher talked to a hardened sinner, and it ain't did no good. Now I aim to talk some about the error of two ways—yo' ways and my ways. I just want to say—"

"Well, dang it all, why don't you say it? I read a book once, but I didn't read the pree-face. All of 'em I ever read weren't worth a damn. I never seen an account of a killin', or anything human in one of them pree-faces in my life. If you got something to say, spit it out. I don't reck'n it'll amount to damn, no how."

"Hiram, son, you have been a scandalous, profligate, on-remitting, tireless, disgusting drunkard ever since I have knowed you, and—"

"Hold on," snapped High. "I didn't

aim for you to just knock the bung out and spill the truth all over this prairie. That'll do about me What about yo'self."

"Hiram, I'm coming to that. I don't aim to spare myself none. I just mentioned you first for politeness, and—"

"And you got a damn pore idea of bein' polite."

"Maybe I have. It's sorty hard to know just how to be polite to a drunken bum like you, but I don't want to argue. I been meditating. I reads a book one time that was writ by a waddy that used to punch cows in Rome. He says—"

"Aw, hell, Short," grinned High. "I thought you was just billious, but you are shore crazy. Them gents in Rome don't do nothing but run fruit stands and hand-organs, and train monkeys. They don't know nothin' about punchin' cows."

"That just shows your iggernance," retorted Short. "If they weren't no ranches and braunk busters in Rome, where the hell do you think all the old Roman-nosed sunfishers we have rid originated. I don't hold it agin you for bein' a dang fool. I reck'n you was that way when you was found on a bedding ground."

"You don't have to get too dang personal about my antecedents and things like that," said High. "You said you aimed to tell off on yo'self some. Go ahead. I can stand it. I got a good stomach."

"Hiram, son," said Short, in a mournful tone, "I got a message for you, but I don't know if you got sense enough to understand it. As I says, that puncher over there in Rome was a meditator. One time a bunch of hands got in a dancehall on some rising ground that they called Capitoline Hill. They was drinking some, and one fellow tried to take another fellow's girl. That started gunstuff, and they shot the place up like a hogbed. It was the next morning that this fancy puncher I told you about got in his work. His name was August. A Dutchman, I reck'n he was, but he was punching cows and tailin' 'em out of bogs in Rome, at that time. Later he got elected to congress, or something, and they called him Saint Augustine."

"Hell of a name for a congressman," grinned High, "but if he could talk as much without saying anything, as you can, he'd make a good one. What did this Dutch waddy do?"

"Why, he gets the boys together next morning, while they ropes out fresh mounts, and asks 'em if they ain't ashamed of theyself for gettin' drunk and raisin' hell. Of course they said they was. You are the only man I ever seen that wasn't ashamed of gettin' drunk."

"Lay off'n me," snapped High. "Tell one on yourself."

"Well, when they said they was ashamed, this Dutchman says to 'em that they don't know how bad that rough stuff looked to other people. Then he says: 'Meditate some. Imagine that you are in the courthouse, then look yo'selfs over. A silent court of justice in yo'self, yo'self the judge and jury, and yo'self the prisoner at the bar—"

"Aw hell, Short. How could a prisoner get to the bar? If a prisoner could get to the bar, I'd like to be in a jailhouse right now."

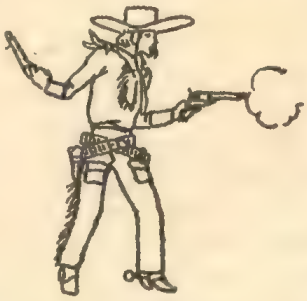
"Listen, Hiram," said Short, wearily, "it ain't no use to try to talk educated language to you. I got to put it plain. You and me has been following herds up this old trail for ages. Every time we draw our pay, you get drunk and I go to searching among them pasteboards for a Royal Flush. We keep up them sinful occupations ontel we are broke and beggin'. That's what I been meditating about. It ain't right. We are good people. Our grandaddies taken Texas away from Mexico, and our daddies runs the Injuns out'n it.

We ought to be good citizens. I'm some older than you, and I'm getting roan. I seen a few gray hairs in yo' head today. It is time for us to quit crow-hoppin', and settle down to a steady gait."

"What the hell are you drivin' at?" asked High.

"Just this, Hiram. You and me has been partners for a long time, and we know we can tie to one another. We been together when lead was plenty, and when grub was scarce, and we ain't never failed to stand hitched. I want you to give me yo' word on something, and I'll give you mine."

"All right," said High, "but give be yo'n first, and let me see how it looks."



"Well, Hiram, these steers are going to be delivered tomorrow, at Dodge City. We'll have around twelve hundred dollars. I want you to agree with me that we won't drink or gamble it away, but will head out for Texas, take up a little ranch, buy a few cows and be respectable ranchmen. I have realized for a long time that sin don't pay, but I been sticking along with you, like a man takes his boy to the circus. I don't have to tell you how you feel when you get over a drunk, and haven't got the price of ham and aigs left. You know what it means, don't you?"

"I shore do, Short," said High, in a serious tone. "I have thought about that a lot of times. It would be a fine thing to have a ranch of our own, some cows and braunks. It would be fine to just get on one hell-roarin' drunk each year when we sold the beef, and then have a home to go to, where I could get sober and natural, without missin' any meals. I'd shore admire—"

"Hiram, son, drink is a terrible curse, and gamblin' ain't much better. I don't aim to lay all the blame for our troubles on you. I have gambled a little, but often I have did it because I knowed that if I didn't lose it at poker, you'd drink it up and ruin yo' health. Here's what I want to do. Out here under these old stars, that have looked down on us so many nights as we rid herd. Out here on this wind-swept prairie, where rain has tried to drown us, and lightning has knocked sand and gravel in our faces, as we tried to keep some crazy herd from going plumb to hell in a stompede, I want us to make a solemn vow to one another, and shake hands on it. I want us to agree that we pocket that money tomorrow, and head for Texas, where temptations can't get us. Then we'll start a ranch and be respectable. If I can get you to agree to this, while you are still young, I'll feel like my life has been worth while. Like I have snatched you as a brand from the burning, as the preacher says."

"Don't, Short," said High. "You'll have me cryin' in a minute. I'm willin'. Here's my hand on it. A haircut and a clean shirt, and one good helpin' of ham and aigs, and we ride for Texas."

They clasped hands solemnly, there under the stars, then rolled a fresh smoke and rode on round the sleeping herd.

Chance plays a strange role in the affairs of men. Instead of being paid off in the forenoon, and getting out of Dodge City as soon as they could get a hair-cut and a clean shirt, they were paid just before night. Each of them stowed his six hundred dollars about his person. They got the hair-cut and clean shirt. After that they got a generous helping of ham and eggs. When they stepped out into the roaring street, with its flaming lights, they turned their backs on temptation, and went to their room at the hotel. They were

still firm in their determination to keep the pact that they had made out under the stars.

"Hiram, son," said Short, as they sat down and rolled smokes, "two men can do a lot more than one. There is an old saying, 'Together we stand; divided we fall.' It originated one night when two drunks were holding on to one another, trying to get home. One of 'em says, 'Hold hard, pardner. If we hang together we can make it; if we ever turn loose, we sleep in the gutter, and maybe the hogs will eat us up.'"

"That was a dang good idee," grinned High.

"It shore was, Hiram, and it is still good. You and me is going to hang together, and win. Nothing in my life has ever give me the pleasure that it is to win you over to my side in this struggle for better things, this determination to be good citizens, and do something that we'll be proud of. I'm—I'm so full of the wonderful thought that I can't contain myself. I can't sit still. I want to be doing something that will further our plans for the future. I'm going to take a walk, far out to the edge of this wicked town, where I can think and plan unmolested."

High said nothing. Short rose and left the room. High could hear Short clump down the stair on his high-heeled boots. He went to a window and looked out. He saw Short turn away from the evil allurements of that wild town, and head for the city limits. When he was out of sight, High decided that he needed a walk, so he left the hotel, to meditate a bit on the future.

That hotel room was on the east side of the building, and up to nine o'clock in the morning the sun came in at that window and blistered the paint on the wall. The blistering rays on High's face woke him, and he stared about the strange room in a dazed manner. Short was not there, but it was late, and he was probably out getting some breakfast. High's mind was not very clear. He recalled that when he left the hotel the night before he went up town. He remembered that he had bought a flat pint, and then had taken a few drinks, but beyond that, things were a bit hazy. Of one thing he was poignantly conscious. That was that he was very dry. He rolled out of the bed, tottered across the room, and caught up the water pitcher. He didn't leave it until the pitcher was empty, and he still felt far from satisfied. He had just returned to the bed, when the door opened and Short came in.

It is probable that in all the annals of sartorial history, nothing has been reported that looked just as Short did at that moment. He wore an orange-colored shirt and bright green tie, striped pants of a pronounced pattern, a watch-chain and charm that jinkled as he walked, and in the green tie a horse-shoe pin, with alternate diamonds and rubies for nails. He took one look at High, and shook his head, sadly.

"Hiram, son," he said, "you have broken my heart. You have failed me in the most important moment of our lives. You have been drunk. You have yielded to the demon rum, and are now reeking with it. You—you—"

"Shut up, you long-laigged buzzard," snapped High. "I seen you sneakin' into the Golden Wheel last night, just after I taken my third drink. I didn't aim to get drunk. I was just goin' to take a few, but when I seen that you had broke yo' promise, and gone hell-for-leather to the wild bunch, I just gives up and don't give a damn what happens. I take some more drinks, and then—Where the hell did you get them clothes, and the jewelry?"

"Never mind any remarks about my person, Hiram," said Short. "A man has a right to wear anything he wants, that he can afford, and I can

afford these garments, and this jewelry. I have told you many a time that poker was an investment, and not a vice, like whiskey. If a man keeps putting money into poker long enough, he is bound to get some out of it."

"Yeah. If you keep pourin' water into a gopher-hole long enough, you can fill it, but you ain't got nothing when it is full."

"Hiram, son, it takes intelligence to play poker. A hog can drink whiskey. I sets into that game last night, and the pot stacks up until it gets pretty juicy. Then three of us stays in, and the bets get high. I gets my whole six hundred covered, and I don't feel very good. I thinks some about that agreement we makes. Then in the showdown, I turns up four aces, and nobody had a Royal Flush. So, I takes the money. I wants to quit then, but the gents I'm playing with don't want me to quit. So, we builds up another pot, and finally I gets to betting with the two others that stays in, puts up all I win, and then—"

"And then you lose yo' shirt and pants," said High.

"Hiram, I'm intelligent. I knows the best anybody can do is tie me, because I got that Royal Flush that I been looking for all these years. I drags ten thousand dollars off'n that little old table. My luck has changed. I can win all the money in the world. I ain't onreasonable. I broke my word, and win us a roll of money. You gets drunk. We'll call it a draw, and start over. We're partners. I can't spend all the money I can win, and I need you to help me spend it. I—"

"Hold on, you half-witted granddaddy spider," snapped High, as he sat up on the side of the bed. "If you had as much sense as a locoed road-runner, you'd know that was all the luck that was coming to you. Where is all that money?"

"Why, it's in the safe, at the Golden Wheel. That is, all of it except a few hundred that I spend this morning."

"Well, you listen to me. Last night, you had an agreement with me that we would go back to Texas and buy a ranch with twelve hundred dollars. We both broke the agreement. Now we are goin' to make it over, and if you try to play any more poker, I'm goin' to feed you some raw meat, with about a pound of strychnine in it. Gamblin' away six hundred bucks ain't so bad, but gamblin' away ten thousand, is a crime. We're goin' to ride to Texas with the money, and buy a real ranch. I ain't got no yearnin' for licker now, and if you yearn for poker you get poisoned."

High got his clothes on. They went down and got breakfast, and an hour later they rode out of Dodge City, with ten thousand dollars in their saddle-rolls, including High's pay, of which he had spent only five dollars. They were well out on the trail, and Short had looked back longingly several times. At last he said:

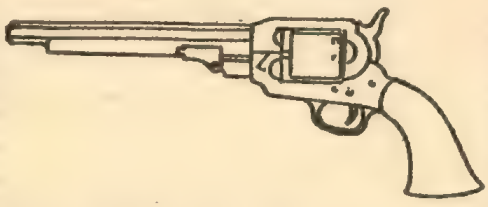
"Hiram, son, you are making a terrible mistake, dragging me away from the mouth of a gold mine, thisaway. If you would of let me went on, I would of made us rich in another night."

"Shut up, you dang fool," snapped High. "If it weren't for me getting you out of tight places, you would be dead, or in the pen, long ago. Spur up, and let's get away from here, before the gents that you takes that money off'n finds out you are gone. Who was they, anyway? Just cowhands, or trail bosses?"

"Nary one, Hiram. They were five of 'em in the game with me. All of 'em were rich gents, and wore diamonds as big as a walnut. They just played poker for the sport. What little I got off'n 'em wouldn't be nothing to gents like them. It wouldn't hurt them none if I win

a hundred thousand off'n 'em, and I could do it easy, now that my luck has changed. What I win off'n 'em wouldn't more than pay for the guns they wore. Each one of 'em had two pearl-handled, silver-mounted guns, and I wouldn't wonder they was set with dimunts. It's a pleasure to play poker with gents like them. Let's go back, Hiram. It's plumb wicked to fly in the face of Lady Luck like this. She won't never come my away again."

"Shut up, you owl-eyed ape," snapped High. "I'm draggin' you out of tribulation, and tryin' to save you from the wrath to come. Throw the steel to that old braunk, and let's get as many miles as we can between us and Dodge City, before night time comes, and boogers begins to prowl."



With a deep sigh of resignation, Short spurred on along the trail. Night found them camped in a little thicket of scrubby timber, in a draw far out in the Indian country. High would make no fire. Short had slept none the night before. Soon after nightfall he spread a blanket, lay down and went to sleep. He lay on his back, still clad in that gorgeous shirt and tie, and the starlight glinted on the paste diamonds and bottle-glass rubies in his lucky horseshoe. High looked at him, and mused:

"You danged fool. If you had any sense, you'd know that no man on earth who had drew four aces in one hand, and a Royal Flush in the next, has any more luck coming to him in a million years. We got the money, now, and if we can get it to Texas we can buy a real ranch, but five men, with two guns per each, makes ten guns the way I figger. You didn't sleep any last night, while you was winning the money, and I don't aim to sleep none tonight, while we are trying to keep it, and get it to Texas. Sleep, dang yo' fool soul. You're apt to need yo' eyes open before we cross Red River."

CHAPTER II

BLOOD RIVER CROSSING

On through the night High watched and listened. He didn't know who the men were that Short won that ten thousand from, but he did know that there was no gambler on that part of the frontier who would willingly give up that much money. Incidentally, he kept thinking of those ten guns, from time to time. Their horses were lariated on good grass a little way from camp. Their saddles lay together, not ten feet from him, and in those rolls were the ten thousand dollars. There was no usual sound at any time. Neither of the horses snorted. Old Short continued to snore in a minor key, as he dreamed of millions that he could win, if only his bull-headed partner would let him stay in Dodge City, while his luck was good.

The east was turning gray when High made a tiny fire, dug out the little coffeepot, and proceeded to make coffee. When it was going good, he woke Short. The old drifter sat up on the ground and rubbed his eyes open.

"Come out of it," snapped High. "Wolf some of this bacon and crackers, and get some coffee into you. We are goin' to ride from here, while we can."

"Hiram," said Short, as he set his coffeecup down, "I been thinking. You been a good partner, but even a good partner can go too far. You ain't got no right to drag me off thisaway, just when I got a chance to win enough to make me independent for life. I never thought I'd split with you over anything.

Whiskey and women ain't never come between us, but when a intelligent man, what has some education, like me, sees a chance to make himself a lot of money, he owes it to hisself to not let a iggernant, drunken bushhorner of a pardner interfere with his business. I'm goin' back to Dodge, and win me some money. If you want to go, it's all right with me. You can get as drunk as you want to. I can make more than we can both spend. If you want to split with me, you can take yo' six hundred and go on to Texas. I—"

"Short," snapped High, "you ain't got the sense that the Lord gives a louse. If you go back to Dodge, you go by yo'self. If I can't keep you from goin', I aim to have the satisfaction of knowin' that I tried to keep you from it."

"All right," drawled Short. "My mind is made up, and you know that when I get it made up good, it sticks. I'm goin' back to Dodge. If you don't want to go with me, get yo' six hundred out'n the roll, and give me the rest."

High didn't say a word. They had quarreled before, and often, but this was the first time that it had ever come to a real break. Both were determined. Neither would ever give in. High jerked loose the strings that held his saddle roll. He took his own six hundred out of the roll, and put it in his pocket. Then he spurned the rest of the money with the toe of his boot over toward Short, who had untied his own roll, and was preparing to put all the ten thousand into it. They were so intent upon what they were doing, while each hoped the other would give in, that they heard and saw nothing until a voice within a few feet of them said:

"Get 'em up, gents. We don't want to hurt nobody."

High looked around and saw six of those ten silver-mounted guns that Short had told him about. They were in the hands of three men, while two more stood by, grinning, as the two drifters put up their hands in silence. One of the two, a black, beetle-browed rascal, said:

"Sorry to disturb you at breakfast, gents, but time is money to us. We ain't got much time, and we need the money."

"Help yo'self," said High, looking down at Short's open roll, with the money in plain view.

"Keep yo' lip out of this," said the ruffian. "It's the other gent that we got business with. I reck'n you didn't know who you was playing poker with, in Dodge. Well, I got to tell you that it was with members of the well-known Finley Gang. Mostly, when we play, we play square, if the other fellow does. But, when a gent draws four aces in one hand, and a Royal Flush in the next, we know he's a card shark. We thought you would stick around, and give us a chance to take it away from you another way, but you tried to sneak out on us. It can't be did, pardner."

Old Short was speechless. He had put his earnings into poker persistently, for years. When he drew those hands he was as much surprised as the other men were in the showdown. If money was ever got honestly in a poker game, he had won that honestly. He made no reply. The robber raked all the money out of Short's roll. Then he took that watch and chain, and the lucky horseshoe, while the three killers still kept their guns on the partners. After that he went through Short's pockets, and found a little more. High was standing all this time, with his hands in the air, and a grin on his face. His own money was in his pocket.

"Now, then, young feller," said the robber, "I'm Jim Finley, leader of the gang. You told me a while ago to help myself. I aim to do that, and you want to be careful that you don't

make any mistake while I'm doing it."

Jim Finley made a very careful survey of High's pockets, and found that six hundred dollars.

"Hold on a minute, pardner," said High. "Don't take that money. It ain't part of Short's winnings. I punched a flock of steers up the trail for that money, and I sorty want to spend it."

"Shut up," snapped Finley. "Money is money to me. I ain't got time to count this little roll, so I'll just take everything in sight."

"I'll bet you four hundred of that little wad that if you take it you get into trouble about it," said High.

"I'll bet you the whole damn ten thousand agin a nickel," snarled Finley, "that if I hear another yap out of you, you'll be in trouble, and somebody will have to bury you."

There was no more talk. Finley not only took the money, but he took every cartridge they had, leaving them their guns. When he was through, he said:

"You Texas waddies think you are smart as hell, but you ain't so bad. We don't want yo' horses. Here's five dollars a piece for you. You can get some cartridges at the first store you strike. There's just one little thing I got to say. Head for Texas when we are gone, and keep traveling. When I meet you again, they's apt to be smoke."

Jim Finley and the other man took the money, and walked away down the draw to where their horses were hid in the brush. When they were gone, the other three backed away, still holding their guns on the partners. At last, they turned and entered the brush. A minute later, the five men rode out of the thicket and headed back toward Dodge City.

"Hiram, son," said Short, "I'm shore glad that happened. Money is the root of all evil. That money was about to split you and me apart, after we had fought, bled and died together for years. I don't mind—"

"Shut up, you damned kioty," snapped High. "I don't care a damn about them ten thousand. Any money got by gamblin' is dishonest money. But, my money was earned by the sweat of the brow—and other places—and damned if I don't want to spend it myself. More than that, I aim to do it."

"But Hiram, they got your money and gone with it," mourned Short. "How do you expect to get it? They's five of them gents, and they are all bad. I have heard that the Finley Gang was the worst killers on this border."

"I know they's five of 'em, now," said High, "but when I kill one, they'll be only four, and when I kill two they'll be only three. I ain't been to school like you, but I can count, and—"

"Listen, High. I don't want you to be mad with me over a little thing like that. We been partners too long. I won't quit you, but we can't follow a army like that, without any cartridges."

"Who the hell says we ain't got cartridges," snapped High. He stooped over, turned up the leather binding on the cantle of his saddle, and disclosed a shiny row of cartridges. He handed Short a handful of them. "Short, I'm scary. I been scared plenty of times, but I never seen the muzzle of a gun that wasn't smokin' look half as bad as them did. Load yo' gun and let's saddle and ride. I want to ketch up with them gents, and ride back to Dodge with 'em. I'm afraid to try to go on to Texas."

"Now see here, High," growled Short. "I'm yo' pardner, and mostly I stay with you, but they ain't no use in you being any bigger damn fool that you always are. If we follers them gents, we get et."

"You invited me to take my choice between goin' back to Dodge, or going to hell, a little while ago," said

High. "I'm extending the same kind of invitation to you, right now. I aim to spend them six hundred in Dodge, like I would of done if I hadn't listened yo' dang fool talk."

High slammed his saddle onto his horse, mounted and turned back toward Dodge. Old Short mounted and followed him. The five men were less than a mile away.

"Hiram, son," pleaded Short, "you got a right to be hard on me. I been a dang fool, and I got you into trouble, but don't lead us right into a den of ravening beasts. Them gents is bad. I'll follow you, if you say so, but we ain't got no chance. They'll take us apart, as soon as we get close enough to see smoke."

"No they won't," grinned High. "They know we ain't got no cartridges, because they takened all we had. We'll just foller on, and walk 'em to death. We got five dollars a piece, and if we want to go back to Dodge and spend it, they can't complain."

"Hiram, son," drawled Short, "I've saw you with money before, but I never knowed you to be so graspin'."

"No," snapped High, "and you never seen me before when I wanted a few drinks of licker as bad as I do now. You wanted to go back to Dodge while yo' luck was good. Let's go. You can take them five dollars and win the city hall, if yo' luck holds like it did when you played with the Finley gang. I tell you, I'm skeered. I don't want to try to go through that Injun country without cartridges, and I won't do it."

Short gave up. He knew High was crazy, but they had made up their quarrel, and that was worth much to the old drifter. High could lead the deal from here on out, and he would gladly follow.

They had ridden five miles, with Finley and his men in sight all the time. Finley had seen them, and he was beginning to wonder what their game was. At last, he slowed up, and they began to gain on him. Jim Finley was bad, and he was a bit of a fox with it. He and his gang had made a clean-up a few days before that, and had gone to Dodge to have some fun. It was a wide-open town all right, and most anything went, but if these two trail-hands followed him into Dodge, and made a yell that he had robbed them, it might make trouble. Finally, he stopped on a bit of rising ground, and faced his men about. He waited until High and Short were within fifty yards of him, and then called:

"Hey! Stop there. What the hell do you two waddies think you are trying to do?"

"Why, we are just going back to Dodge, to get some ca'tridges and things," replied High.

"No you are not," snarled Finley. "I told you two drifters to head for Texas, and I meant it."

"I know you told us that," whined High, "but you didn't tell us that you owned this trail."

"I damn shore own the part of it that I'm on," rapped the outlaw chief. "Get going the other way, before we fix you so you can't go."

"Hiram," said Short, "you got me skeered, now. I told you not to follow them he-tigers. Stop, before they take us apart."

High had been letting his horse drift slowly toward Finley and his men. Suddenly, the robber band jerked their guns. When they did, something happened that they were not looking for. High and Short both fired as one shot, and two of Finley's men went from their saddles. Those two guns went right on smoking. It was raining lead around Jim Finley and the other two, when they broke and rode out of range. High made no move to give chase. He threw the empty shells from his gun and reloaded. Then they rode on to where the two dead me- lay. High dismounted, and said:

"Well, here's where we get some

ca'tridges." He calmly removed the gun and belt full of cartridges from each of the men, handing one to Short, and wrapping the other around his own saddlehorn. Then he went back to the men, and began going through their pockets.

"Hiram, son," drawled Short, "you and me ain't never robbed the dead. Let them fellers alone."

"Let 'em alone, hell," jeered High. "If they got any money, they won't need it where they are goin'. Somebody has got my six hundred. I'll just take what these gents has got on 'em, then when I settle with Jim Finley, I'll give him credit for it."

High's search of the bodies produced two hundred dollars. He put it in his pocket, saying:

"Well, we may get killed, but we won't starve to death."

"Hiram, son," said Short, "that's enough money to get us to Texas. We had a little luck that time, because them gents didn't know we was loaded, but we won't have no more. I'm skeered, good, now. If we follow any farther, we are apt to run into the rest of that Finley gang. Let's head back the trail."

"Nope," grinned High. "Dodge City is where we got off the trail, and I aim to go back there and start over. That was where the roads forked. You thought you was taking the fork-hand that was the straight and narrow. You taken the one that come dang nigh leading us to hell. If we had gone on and acted natural. If you had lost yo' roll at poker, and I had drunk mine up, we never would have had no trouble. You wanted to be a human, dang yo' fool soul. If you had any sense you'd know you couldn't be a natural human. Come on. Let's catch up with them gents again. We just lack one of having 'em trimmed to our size."

"Wait a minute, High," begged Short. "Don't crowd yo' luck. I tell you them gents is bad, and—"

"Bad, hell. You plumb changed yo' notion about 'em. You said they was rich gents that plays poker for sport. Nice fellers that wouldn't worry if they lose a hundred thousand in one game. Come on. They was just joking when they taken that money away from us. They'll give it back when we ketch up with 'em again."

"High," said Short, "I like a brave man, but a damn fool ain't no account for anything. We can't—"

"Now, see here, Short," snapped High. "You laid down the law to me while we et breakfast. I'm laying it down now. If you got cold feet, or something, and want to head for Texas, take half of this money, and hit the trail. I'm goin' on to Dodge."

"You go plumb to hell," snarled Short. "If you think you'll go where I won't go, you got another think coming. The only place you can go where I won't go is through a knot-hole, you damned little runt. I don't want none of that money that was took off'n a dead gent. It's tainted."

"Maybe it is," grinned High, "but it will buy ham and aigs, whiskey and poker chips. Come on. Let's ride."

High took the trail, and Short followed reluctantly. He wanted his ten thousand dollars, but he wanted to live to spend it, and he saw little chance of that if they crowded Jim Finley, and jumped him when he was looking. Finley and his men were well mounted, and were getting all their horses had. High and Short had no idea why the robbers were in such a hurry to get away from two men. The fact was that Finley had a dozen more men in Dodge City, and he wanted to get to them, get them together, and get out of town. Finley was no fool. He knew these two drifters were not ordinary cowhands. He might win in

a fight with them, now that he knew they had cartridges and could not surprise him, and again he might not. Some of that whining lead had come uncomfortably close to him. The worst thing that could happen would be for these two gun-slingers to get into Dodge and raise a yell. He and the four men who had been with him in the poker game, and in this morning's raid, were the aristocrats of his gang. The rest were just mill-run thugs. He had to get to Dodge City, and get them together. They would be scattered all over town, half of them drunk. He led on for several hours, seeing the two drifters behind him from time to time as they crossed a ridge. At last, fear crept into the heart of the big outlaw. He must not go into Dodge, with those fellows at his heels. He turned his course to the east, when High and Short were on a high ridge, and could see him plainly. As Finley led away down a long swale, he saw High and Short cut across the angle, which would bring them much nearer. When the partners reached the bottom of the swale, Finley and his two men were out of sight, in some broken country to the east of them.

It was after noon, now. High found a little waterhole in a draw, and pulled up:

"Well," he said, "here's where we camp. Them gents has decided not to go to Dodge, so we can't foller 'em any farther. We got to let our braunks rest and fill up, while we eat up something, take a nap maybe, and get ready for a happy night in town. It ain't more than fifteen mile to Dodge, from here. All I want is for us to get in there, get our money spent natural, and get back on the trail that we left when we started off after that ranch in Texas. We ain't got much money. We can spend it in one night."

They larlated their horses. High made a fire and soon had a little pot of coffee, some broiled bacon, and other things that would sustain life until they reached the ham and eggs of Dodge City. Short was not sleepy. High stretched out in the shade of a little bush, and went to sleep as soon as he ate. Old Short climbed to a little bit of high ground, and squatted down in the scorching sun. No one would approach that camp without being seen.

When all is said, man is the wildest of the animals. Nothing is harder to stalk than a wanted man. No one was trying to find High and Short, just then, but Short didn't know it. What he did know was that High had had no sleep the night before. What the next few hours might bring to them, no one could know. They would at least need to be awake. So, squatting there in the sun, Old Short watched. He would like to have his ten thousand back. He had taken out of poker, in that one coup, a very small percentage of what he had put into it in the passing years. He felt that he had won it honestly, and had been robbed. But, adversity had its compensations. He had almost split with High over that lousy ten thousand. Now, it was gone, and they were true partners again. Short had serious misgivings about going back to Dodge, to get on the right trail again, but he knew that High was going there. He had been to blame, and now he would follow High to the end of the world, and stay with him as he fell over the edge. He might swear he was scared to death, in an effort to keep High off dangerous ground, but the lank old drifter didn't know what fear was.

It was almost sunset when Short went back to the camp. High was calmly making a pot of black coffee, and broiling the last of the bacon.

"Hiram, son," said Short, "life is a strange thing. A fellow thinks he wants a thing, and when he gets it, he finds out it ain't worth so much.

Now, about that ranch. If we had got it, we might built up a little flock of cattle, one way and another, and then along would come a drouth, with short grass and no water, and we'd lose it all. I—I reck'n I was billious, or something when I made that dang fool ranch proposition to you the other night. I reck'n we better call it off, and—"

"Call it off, hell," grinned High. "Jim Finley called it off for us, and if he sees us again, he's going to do his dangdest to shoot it off."

"I know it, Hiram. That's why I want you to hit the trail for Texas. If we rides into Dodge, we gets perforated like a tin sign at the aige of town, and—"

"Better save that breath you are usin' to run with," snapped High. "Dang yo' long-laigged soul, you want to see Jim Finley, just one time, worse than I do. They ain't got but four hundred of my money, now, and they got ten thousand of yo'n. Lap up that coffee. We're going to Dodge as soon as it gets dark."

As High and Short broke camp at nightfall, three men sat their horses in a close group, in the head of a draw less than five miles away. They were to the northeast of High and Short, and only a mile or two nearer to Dodge than they were. The three were Jim Finley and his two chief lieutenants, Whit Perry and Henry Merle. Finley was just a black-hearted villain, with a lot of sense and shrewdness. Whit Perry was a high-class outlaw, game as a tiger, a man of good appearance, and some education. Merle was a gentleman, so far as the polish of universities and the world could make him one. He had the manners, and spoke the language of a much better element than that with which he was now associated. Just one of the fallen angels that are sometimes found in the rough spots on the world's borders. Merle was speaking:

"Jim," he said, "why are we running from a couple of trailhands? There are three of us, and we are all good shots. It sticks in my gizzard to run away and leave Turk and Shep out there for the wolves to eat, and drag their bones about the prairie. Let's go back and get them."

"No," growled Finley. "It is one of the rules of our gang that when a man is dead, nothing makes any difference to him. Them two boys was dead when they left their saddles. There was a bullet-hole through each of their heads that you could throw a bale of hay through."

"I know it," said Merle, "but they were good pals, and game fighters, and entitled to decent burial. I didn't know you were afraid of anything. Are you afraid of those two drifters?"

"No," said Finley, "I ain't afraid of the devil, but I've got a little sense. A general is right important to an army. Any dang fool general knows how to charge, and get his men killed; it takes a wise one to retreat and wait for another chance. Our boys are scattered all over Dodge City, some drunk, some in dancehalls, and some at poker tables. It is up to me to get 'em out of there before it becomes norated around that the Finley gang is in town."

"I see," said Merle. "You didn't help matters any when you bragged to those drifters this morning that you were Jim Finley.

"No, I didn't," said Finley, ruefully, "but the wisest man in the world is a damn fool sometimes, and that was my time. I made a mistake when I didn't just give 'em both the lead, but there is a lot of travel on that trail. If we had killed 'em, and then met somebody a mile or two from them, it would have been dangerous. He would have gone on and found 'em before they got cold, and know we kilt 'em. There's marshals all over this country. Some of

'em know Jim Finley when they see him, but don't know him by that name. So, I made a mistake."

"Yes," said Merle, "and you may make another one or two, before you get out of this little mess. I told you it was bad business to follow those fellows and take that money. That fellow, Short, won it on the level, and—"

"Yes," snapped Finley, "and I guess the banks and the like that we rob get their money on the level. That ten thousand was easier to get than any that we have taken in a long time."

"It has cost us more," said Merle, "than any that we have taken since I have been with your gang, and it is likely to cost us still more."

"Who's running this gang?" snapped Finley. "You or me?"

"Oh, you are running it," said Merle, coolly. "I was just trying to advise you a little."

"Well, I don't want your advice. We are going into Dodge, get the gang together, split the money we have and scatter, before them two drifters can start anything. Come on."

It was a dark, cloudy night, and for a mile of the way, High and Short rode parallel to the outlaws, and almost within hearing of them. Neither party was hurrying, and if they had known what was going to happen in that lovely city of lights and laughter; wine, women and song, neither of them would have wanted to hurry. They entered the town only a block apart, and as it chanced took their horses to different livery stables.

When High and Short stepped into the street, after leaving their horses, each had his own gun at his belt, and a silver-mounted, pearl-handled pistol hid in his clothes.

"High," said Short, "if you get drunk tonight, and don't get killed, I'll kill you afterwards."

"Shut up," said High, in a low tone. "I aim to be sober when I gets homicided. Any way, I want to be able to count them other four hundred that's coming to me, if I meet Mr. Finley. Here's where I plays poker, instead of drinking—just one time."

The Golden Wheel was a high-class saloon and gambling house, all on the ground floor. It fronted east, and along the north side was a bar. The rest of the house, about an acre of it, was taken up with gaming tables of every known kind. High and Short entered, and looked the place over. Short led the way back to the poker table. He was not in such a hurry to get into the game, with only a hundred dollars on him, but he didn't want to linger near the bar. He knew that one good smell of whiskey, and he would lose High. Something told him that he was going to need his partner, and need him sober.

They slid into chairs at the poker table, and each called for a stack of chips. There was no two-bit ante in that joint. It was a dollar a shot, and the betting ran into real money. Short knew they couldn't stay long, unless his luck was still holding. It was not. Every time High would peel off a bill from his dwindling roll, he would think of the number of drinks that he could get for it. Every time Short would peel one off, he would expect that his luck would win him a roll of money. Both had their eyes on the front door, and that long bar, so they were not

playing very carefully. Just before their money gave out, they saw three men enter the saloon. They were tall, rawboned gentlemen, with hard faces and watchful eyes. Anyone would know them to be hard-bitten officers of the law, and it was a cinch that they were not looking for some one who had committed a misdemeanor. They stopped midway the bar, and took a drink, all watching the whole house in the big mirror behind the bar.

"I think we got the wrong dope," said one of them, in a low tone. "I don't see anything in here that looks like what we are after."

"Don't worry," replied one of the others. "Just stick around. I got this thing straight. Jim Finley and his gang have been in Dodge for a week. They have played poker right in here, and this is headquarters for the gang. I've got the boys all placed, and if anything starts, we'll take all of 'em."

The three officers were taking another drink, when High and Short pushed back their chairs and rose from the table. Their little rolls were gone, but they had to stick around a while.

"I can't get drunk now," said High. "I haven't got the price of one drink. I don't believe them fellers are coming in here, and I want to see Mr. Finley, and collect them other four hundred. Let's get out, and look some of the other joints over. They are bound to of come to town."

High and Short started for the door. They passed near the three tall men at the bar, and noticed their narrowed eyes scanning them closely. They had almost reached the door, when it opened and three more men came in. They were Jim Finley, Merle and Perry. That old place had seen a lot of rough stuff, but never had it seen just such a tableau as that. Finley and his men saw the two drifters that they were trying to dodge. High and Short saw the three men that they meant to collect off of, or kill. The three officers saw Jim Finley and two of his men, and knew them, but there were two trail hands between them and the outlaws. They took a step, to go around High and Short, and get their men, then they stopped. Something was going on there at the front end of the bar.

"Well, Mr. Finley," grinned High. "Glad to meetcha. I want four hundred bucks that you taken away from me this morning. I got two hundred off'n them two gents that stopped in the trail."

"Shut up, you damn fool," growled Finley. "If you call my name again, I'll blow you apart. I'm not going to give you anything."

"If you don't give me four hundred," said High, "you ain't never goin' to need no more money yo'self."

With an oath, Finley jerked his gun, and Merle followed suit. Perry was inching toward the door for some reason. The next second, guns were roaring. Finley and Merle both went down. High had put a bullet square through Finley's heart. Short had missed the mark slightly, and Merle would have to wait a while before he went, but he was on his way.

Perry sprang out the door, but at the same second guns began roaring in the street. Perry went down. Half a dozen others were shot from their saddles, as they waited in front of the saloon for Finley to get the main roll out of the safe in the Golden Wheel. The officers had the right dope, and had laid an ambush for the Finley gang, who had been riding western Kansas for months.

High and Short stepped back from the two men on the floor, just as the three officers rushed up.

"Here, you two bullies," snapped one of the officers. "What kind of a party is this?"

"Poker party," said High.

"Hell it is," said the officer. "I don't see no cards."

"No," grinned High, "but there's a couple of cracked chips that fell on the floor. Better call the porter, to sweep 'em up."

"Who the hell are you fellers, anyway?"

"Just a couple of trail-hands," replied High.

"Do you know who them two gents on the floor are?"

"One of 'em said he was Jim Finley. We ain't been introduced to the other one."

"Now, see here," said the officer, let's get the straight of this. Was you two layin' for Finley."

"Well, not exactly," said High. "He owed us some money, and we wanted to collect it."

"Owed you money? Why—What —"

"It was this way," said Short. "I played some poker with Finley and some of his gang, and win ten thousand dollars off'n 'em. Then my partner and me taken the money and headed for Texas. This morning about daylight them five jumps us, stands us up, and robs us, not only of the ten thousand, but six hundred that belonged to my partner, and—"

"Hold the deal," said the officer. "Can you prove that?"

"No, I don't reck'n we can," drawled Short. "Two of the five is out on the trail, and can't talk, one got away, and the other two is present, but not voting."

"I can vote," came a weak voice from the floor. It was Merle. "I belonged to the Finley gang, but I'm a gentleman, and my word is good. He is telling it straight. He won the money on the level, and Jim Finley insisted on taking it away from him."

"Where is it?" asked the officer.

"Out there in a saddle-roll on Jim Finley's horse, if the horse is not gone."

Two of the officers went outside. A few minutes later they came back, carrying a saddle-roll. Game to the last, Merle had propped himself on an elbow, as he slowly bled to death internally.

"Is this Finley's saddle roll?" asked the officer.

"Yes," replied Merle, "and all the money there is in it was taken from these two trailers."

"All right, you two," said the officer. "They took this money away from you. If gambling money wasn't honest money, nobody in this town could buy anything with what he has. What are you going to do with it?"

"Put it back in the safe," said Short, "where I had it before we started to Texas."

High and Short took a couple of hundred each, and the rest went into the safe, to await their pleasure.

"Got any more use for us?" asked High.

"Not unless you want to be deputies," replied the officer. "We need some men like you on this Border. You saved us some cartridges just now."

"Nope," said High. "We are just trail-hands, and aim to head for Texas, as soon as we can get back in the trail."

"Queer pair of waddies," said the officer, as they went out. "Game as he-tigers. It took sand to do what they did."

Out in the street, High and Short stopped. They saw Jim Finley and Merle carried out. Merle was now dead.

"That's what's at the end of the wrong trail," said High, "and you and me damn nigh took it. You go on to the hotel and get that room for us, Short. I aim to go to the stable, and see about our horses." High walked off toward the stable, and Short went to the hotel. At the stable, High said to the liveryman: "I don't know how long we'll stay here. Take this hundred dollars and keep it for me. When we come for

our horses, take out pay for keepin' 'em, and give me the rest. If I come here drunk, don't give it to me. If my partner comes here sober, don't give it to him. That's all."

High walked off toward the hotel, and the liveryman watched him and shook his head, muttering under his breath:

"Crazy, I reck'n, but I'll keep his money for him. Maybe he's goin' on a bat."

Short had been to the hotel and engaged a room, but he was gone when High got there. High went up to the room, washed his face and combed his hair. Then he got his bearings and headed for the bright lights. He never knew much about what happened that night. He was hunting for what he called the human trail of life, and he took a devious way to find it. He drank and drank, but it seemed that he would never get drunk. He knew that Short had gone back to the Golden Wheel, but he didn't seek him. The sooner Short lost that ten thousand, the sooner they would be back in the safe and sane human trail. It was far toward morning when he staggered out of a saloon, with a pint bottle in his hand. He heard chickens crowing, and knew it was almost morning. He went on to the hotel, and climbed the stair with limber legs. He was drunk everywhere but in his head. Short was not in the room. High pulled the cork from the pint bottle, stuck it in his face, and let it run until he strangled. Then he went to bed. It was ten o'clock next morning when High woke. His head was still sober, but his mouth was dry as a desert. He had not been drunk, didn't even have a headache.

"What the hell's the matter with me?" he muttered, as he stole across to the water-pitcher. "If I get so I can't get drunk, I never can have no more fun." The bottle, still half full, lay on the floor. He picked it up, looked through it at the sunlight, then took a snort. An odd look came over his face, and he wrinkled his nose. "Well, I'll be damned. That ain't whiskey. I been tryin' to get drunk on dried peach juice and water. I'm goin' down and get a quart of Old Crow, with the seal on it, and see can I make happy come. Wonder where the hell Short is?"

High was slowly and soberly dressing himself, when Short barged into the room. What he done to himself when he won ten thousand, was just a modest effort at dress. Now, he wore a suit that looked like an overgrown checkerboard. His tie was gorgeous beyond description, and in it was a real blue diamond, as big as a hickory nut. On one finger was a diamond ring that must have made the moon and stars hide their faces in shame.

"Hiram, son," chortled Short, "we are goin' to get that ranch yet. We can get two of 'em, one a piece, and the best ones in Texas. I went back to the Golden Wheel last night and played some poker. I win five thousand more. Then I went over and poked a thousand down on the goose-egg in the roulette wheel, and won a hundred thousand. I can't lose. We are goin' to be rich. I—why, Hiram, son, you don't seem to be happy about our good luck."

"No I ain't Short. I never have been much afraid of the Old Devil, but I'm afraid he's got you and me this time."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I drinks everything I could get my hands on last night, and couldn't get drunk. Then you plays poker and bucks the wheel, and can't lose. Looks like the gate has been opened to the broad and easy way,

and you and me is headed straight for hell. I wish I had took them two hundred and headed for Texas, when you wanted me to."

"Shut up, you dang fool. Ain't I told you that poker was a investment? I haven't drew half I've put into it, yet. Now, while I can't lose, I aim to draw it all out, and some interest. Then you and me can go to Texas and get them ranches."

"I don't want no ranch that's bought with gamblin' money," declared High. "I'm going out and see can I get drunk. If I can't, I ain't fitten for no partner for you, and if you can't lose them ill-gotten gains, you won't never be no partner for nobody."

Lights flamed in the Golden Wheel that night. Dice clicked, cards fluttered, wheels spun, and all was joy. Short was in the midst of it. His raiment would have made Solomon in all his glory look like a rag-man. He was winning, and the flush of conquest was on his leathery old face. He had quit cigarettes, and was smoking four-bit cigars. He would smoke an inch of one and throw it away for a fresh one. He had not seen High since he left the room that morning. Let him go to the devil. If he wanted to sulk and sull like a mad steer in a thicket, let him do it. He'd come around when he got broke.

Meantime, High was trying to see if he had lost the manly art of getting drunk. He had not. By mid-afternoon he was soused to the ears. By nightfall he was terribly drunk.

When High woke next morning, Short was in bed and sound asleep. High had a head on him like a Norman horse. He drank all the water he could find, picked up his trousers and felt in his pockets. Nothing there. Not a cent. Oh, well. Short was rich. High looked about, but didn't see the checked suit. He looked at Short's shirt front, but there was no diamond there. He looked at his hand. The ring was gone. Then High grinned, in spite of his aching head, and his desire for one little drink, to bring him to life. He picked up the pillow from his bed and slammed it in Short's face. Old Short came up from it like a mad sow.

"Wake up," grinned High. "I want to borrow a couple of thousand dollars to buy me some toothpicks."

"Go to hell," growled Short.

"Hot enough here," jeered High. "What's the matter with you? Yesterday morning you owned the earth and was happy. You still own it, don't you? Why ain't you happy now?"

Short swung his long legs off the bed and sat up, with his face in his hands. There was a long silence, and then:

"Hiram, son, I'm—I should have listened to you. I—I'm broke. My luck turned last night and turned the wrong way."

"Oh, that's all right," chuckled High. "I still got four hundred over at the Wheel, and that'll—"

"No you haven't, Hiram. That money was all put in the safe in my name, and I lost all of it for you."

"Why, you long-laigged buzzard. I've told you plenty of times that gamblin' would make a thief of a man."

"Don't, Hiram. I'm—I'm mighty low this morning. I—I might do something desperate. It's a terrible drop from wealth and opulence one morning, to poverty and want the next. Have you got any money at all?"

"Not a dang cent," said High, soberly, "and we got to pay for this room, and get our braunks out'n the stable. Maybe we could put up that dimunt, and get enough to get out of town on."

"Hiram, son, I hate to tell you, but that ring's gone. It's all yo' fault. You wouldn't be friendly with me yesterday morning when I was rich. I would have given you a thousand or two then if you had asked me, and we would have money now."

"Yeah, you dang fly-up-the-creek. If you hadn't stole my four hundred, we'd have all we need for another round of poker for you, and another drunk for me."

"Don't be too hard on me, Hiram," begged Short. "You don't know what it is to be rich beyond yo' dreams one day, and poor beyond hope the next. I—I feel like I can never get used to bein' a poor man again."

"Short, we got to ride from here. You go see can you get the hotel man to wait for his pay until we can send it to him. I'll go to the stable, and try to talk the fellow out of our horses."

Short didn't have the nerve to broach the matter to the landlord, who had seen him the day before wearing a king's ransom in diamonds. It was an hour before High came. When he did, he had both horses and a bulky roll behind each saddle. High asked Short if he had squared things with the hotel, and he said:

"Hiram, I—I couldn't do it. I'm low in spirits, and I think that grub we et poisoned me. You—you got a good face, and a convincing manner. You talk to him. If he wants a note, I'll sign it with you."

"That's shore lovin' of you," grinned High, as he walked away to seek the landlord where Short couldn't see him. He came back presently, and told Short that he had fixed it, and they could pay the bill when they came up the trail next year.

"He's a white man," declared Short. "Don't you reck'n you could borrow about twenty dollars from him, and give me a chance to win something back? Tonight I'll be lucky, if—"

"You'll be lucky right now, if I don't bend a gun over yo' head," snapped High. "If you ketched the smallpox, you couldn't keep it. Straddle that braunk, and let's get out of this place of iniquity, before you catch something that you can't get well of."

High led the way and Short followed, sadly. There was no talking. Short's face was a mask of misery. High was grinning like an ape, but he didn't let Short see him do it. On through the day they rode. It was almost sunset when Short said:

"Hiram, son, we are going to have to eat pretty soon."

"Hell we are," said High. "Want to stop and try some of this grass? They's a ranch that we can make by morning, and I reck'n we can eat there."

Short groaned. A mile farther on, High pulled into a little valley, where there was a running stream. They unsaddled in silence, and lariated their horses. Short took up a hole in his belt. High made a fire and unrolled the pack from behind his saddle. When Short smelled coffee boiling, and bacon frying, he said:

"Hiram, you are the biggest liar in the world, but I love you. Where the hell did you get that grub, without money?"

"I didn't. I left a hundred with the liveryman."

"A hundred," roared Short. "You claim to be a pardner, and hold out on me like that. I could have took fifty and gone back to the Golden Wheel tonight—"

"Fill yo' face with that grub," snapped High. "If I hear you mention the Golden Wheel again, I'll shoot you apart. We are heading for Texas, and we got money enough to take us there."

They ate in silence, then spread their blankets and lay looking at the stars. At last, Short said:

"Hiram, son, it is great to be rich, but—a good pardner, that will stay with you when he knows you are a damn fool, is better than riches, better than Four Aces and a Royal Flush."

THE BORDER BRAND

"When I have finished," gloated the Mexican, "the cords of your fingers will be cut. Never again will you pull trigger."

By

NELS LEROY JORGENSON

From Pais Del Inferno Rode He Who Could Shoot No More — And After Him Galloped The Man Who Carried Gun Magic In His Hands.

Mike Quentin had to sit there, his muscles leashed, straining, his eyes dead, guns cold in their holsters—and watch it. Watch them make of his trailmate a partial cripple, by running a Bowie knife across his gun hand.

It was a cruelly simple operation. The knife had only to cut the tendons of Pete Crosby's gun fingers at the knuckles.

Quentin sat frozen and silent, his bleak eyes telling nothing. Across the room was Pete Crosby, moveless before the rough table, his hands strapped down on the table by means of leather bands. Standing over Pete was Torredos, Manuel Torredos, leader of the outlaw pack of *Pais del Inferno*——Hell's country.

Around the room were Torredos' men. Six gunmen, all waiting, eyes glittering wolfishly in the hope that

Crosby's trailmate would go to his defense. They all wanted the chance to burn down these two who had trailed together from north of the Border, down here with the wild wolf-pack of Manuel Torredos.

But Mike Quentin made no move. He watched, eyes only smoldering under their down-drooped lids. He knew the rest were watching him, waiting, hoping to pounce.

He dared not look at Crosby. Young Pete, game and hard and swaggering, his trailmate through months of desperate riding with Torredos' pack below the Border. Now Pete had violated ethics. It had been Torredos' ethics he had violated, and they were coyotes' ethics. But just the same, he had to pay for it.

So Mike Quentin had to sit and watch it, watch the Bowie knife in the hands of the huge Torredos, as it came thirstily down. He tried to hide the light in his green-gray eyes as he watched Torredos.

The outlaw leader was a big man. He had a barrel for a chest, huge shoulders. Stained but strong teeth over thick, sensual lips.

"So we part, eh Crosby? We jus' do not agree; *no es?* But, so that I need have no fear from you or your guns any longer, here is my *adios!* gift to you!"

The Bowie knife glinted wickedly. Crosby could not have moved his hands, if he would. The knife sucked thirstily as it cut across his knuckles.

Blood spurted, and there was an indrawn, subdued *"Aah!"* from the watching men. Their eyes were killer's eyes, shining now with the lust that the sight of that red blood gave them.

The color drained from Mike Quentin's cheeks, left their leanness pale under a heavy tan.

Quentin met Crosby's eyes. The eyes of both men were stony. No message, no intelligence passed between them.

Quentin knew that the killer pack would be watching for just that. Did Crosby understand? He sat moveless.

Torredos laughed, beckoned to one of his men. "Hola! Give him a handkerchief——a dirty one! Here! Put his gun back in its holster. He will not use it again. What a jest. The tiger with his claws drawn, eh? He rocked with cruel mirth. "Now—cut him loose!"

Two breeds stepped forward to do his bidding. Still Mike Quentin sat apart, detached, his eyelids almost closed. He saw, on the flooring, the blood from his partner's ruined hand. Crimson. He did not dare to look up. Did not dare meet Crosby's eyes.

He heard Torredos say:

"There is your gun! You will not use it soon. Your horse is outside."

Quentin knew that most of the wolf-pack was watching him as his trailmate got up, staggered a trifle, wrapped the soiled bandanna more closely about his mutilated hand. But still he did not meet Pete Crosby's gaze when Crosby moved to the door and stumbled out.

They heard sound outside, muffled sound. Then the creak of saddle leather, the retreating hoofbeats of a horse. Crosby was gone. He had a gun, but it had been emptied, for precaution—lest he should try to come back for revenge on quick impulse.

Torredos stepped to the table, tore off his bandanna and mopped at the blood there. He picked up the whisky jug, splashed a good portion of liquid into one of the tin cups on the table, and downed it in one gulp.

He laughed, banged the cup down, and turned to Quentin, mockery in his evil eyes.

But Quentin was not where he had last seen him. The others had all been moving toward the table and the whisky. For fatal seconds, their eyes were off the lean two-gun man.

Now Mike Quentin was at the door. When Torredos turned, he found himself staring into the blue-

black holes of Quentin's twin .44s. Above the guns, Quentin himself was crouched, in that crouch they all knew so well. They froze as Quentin drawled, his voice a knife-edge:

"Don't let anybody make foolish moves! Reckon you all know me—— you pack of coyotes!"

The sound of Pete Crosby's horse had by then died away. The room became silent. It was hot, with the dry, hot heat of Hell's desert, outside Arecibo, just within a night's riding distance northward to the American side of the Border. Cigarette smoke lay in layers. The reek of it and cheap whisky mingled with the nauseating taint of warm blood in the air.

They watched Mike Quentin—Quentin and the two guns they knew so well. And they did not move. They heard him say, while his strong white teeth flashed contemptuously:

"I had to let you do it, Torredos. You were all only waitin' for me to move. You and your coyote pack wanted to burn us both down, Crosby and me. You've always hated us both. And because I knew that——because I wanted another chance at you, with Crosby alongside me, I sat there. I couldn't have helped him then. That'd have been playing right into your hands. But, hombres of hell's country, I'm ridin' to help him now!"

Torredos moved. Quentin's gun covered his middle. But the big outlaw only said:

"But you, Quentin, our quarrel is not wit' you. Crosby refused to—"

"To join your dirty game up north! Well, so do I. I was in town when you first sprung your plan; I kept quiet while you went into details. But—" and the white teeth flashed again—"both Pete and I'll be in it, at that—only on the other side! *Adios!*"

Quentin kicked open the rickety door behind him with a long-spurred heel, stood framed for seconds there.

Then he laughed. With the laugh he fired twice. The lamp on the table flew and spattered tongues of flame. Oaths came, powder crimson charged across the room. Guns spat and lead dug harmlessly in the flimsy boarding of the shack.

When the maddened killer pack got to the door, Mike Quentin was gone. They could hear the hoofbeats of his big black, Gringo, fading on the northward trail. With that sound, they gave up any ideas of pursuit.

They knew Gringo.

Quentin had more than a hazy idea of where he was going. He wanted to locate Crosby; that was the important thing. After that—well, he had left behind one man in Torredos' camp that he could count on. But now Crosby would not want to see him. Crosby would hate him. However, Pete must be made to understand.

He and Crosby had been trailmates for a long time, down here in this country of hell. Once, Pete had saved his life. Twice he had challenged death to save Crosby's life. It was even.

Crosby—if he did not understand already—must be made to comprehend why his partner had stayed moveless, unaiding, in that recent sanguine scene. Crosby would be bitter; but he would know, understand, when it came time for the last deal in the bloody pack.

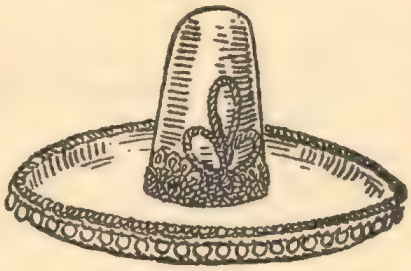
Quentin's thoughts, after the Border was behind him, were grimly dark. Dawn saw horse and rider plodding on U. S. soil. The blue of the Hondos Valley lay across the northern skyline. Quentin slept for a little, then picked up his trail to the town of Whitaker, the county seat.

Crosby was selling himself to a mad scheme. The younger of the two trailmates had actually had to flee into Mexico because he had a killing to account for, near Whitaker. That had been years back. After his flight,

he had met Quentin. From then on, they had shared each other's luck and hardships.

But Crosby loved a girl. He must know he could never have her now. It had been over her that he had killed his man, in Malpais, three years back. It was not too strange, at that, thought Quentin—that it was because of danger hovering over the head of that same girl that Crosby had broken with Torredos.

Quentin shook his head. Anyway, he told himself, he would have split with Torredos when this new scheme came. It was all very well to be raiding with that outlaw pack in Mexico, where any man was more likely to be an enemy than a friend. But Torredos had got himself hooked up with a combination north of the Border.



That was where the two Americans stopped.

Torredos had explained to his pack that he had made contact with a powerful *haciendado* in the Hondos Valley, Gardner, by name. Joyce Gardner. Gardner seemed to own most of the place. He controlled the single bank in Whitaker, held a grip over the sheriff, owned the hotel-bar, which was called the *Rio Star,* and in general commanded the countryside.

His ideas formed dreams of empire. He was going to force out every independent rancher on the valley, foreclose on them through the bank, on their belongings, and finally crown himself the undisputed king of the section.

But he had an even deeper scheme than that. It was there, when Torredos let fall mention of it, that Crosby had made his decision.

That was where the girl came in. It was the girl that Pete had grown up with, the girl over mention of whose name he had fought his killer battle in Malpais, and had become "wanted." That fight, too, had set a number on Pete Crosby's days, as Quentin knew. The two pieces of lead that he had taken were still in his lungs. No wonder he had ridden hard and savage and careless. He had no fear of death. He had only wanted to get something done before it came.

By mid-afternoon, halting for water, Quentin could make out a blot of brown against the green landscape that told him he was approaching Whitaker. Near here he would find Pete, he was certain. But how—?

The girl! Quentin remembered her name. He knew that Pete would get to her in some way.

That was, in the end, how he found his partner. Arriving in Whitaker, he washed, had a shave and attended to Gringo. Then he went into the *Rio Star* bar, and ordered something to take the encrusted alkali dust out of his throat. He had plenty of gold coins in his pocket; the problem of living would not have to be met for some time in the future.

It was hot. The street outside the barroom was a powdery white inferno. The horses stood with drooping heads at their racks. Across the street, Quentin saw the buckboard draw up. He saw the girl. And he knew her even before a voice at his side said:

"Joyce Gardner's no fool, eh?"

Gardner!

That name! He looked again at the girl. She had gone into the store, but he could still see her. Lord, she was lovely! No wonder that hungry, aching look would invade Pete's eyes when he thought of her. When he realized what a few moments of blazing folly had lost to him forever!

But those words—they must have meant, then, that in some way, the girl entered into Joyce Gardner's

plans for the fate of the valley. Because the man at Quentin's side had been looking directly at the girl when he spoke.

Turning, Quentin said to his neighbor, with a disarming smile: "I'm a stranger here. But I've passed through Whitaker before. Isn't that girl—?" He stopped, hopefully.

The man looked him over, then laughed knowingly.

"Maybe yuh know her, and maybe yuh don't," he said. "Either way, it won't do yuh no good. That's Helen Chalmers, and I reckon claim on her has been all staked out. She owns the Linked C alone now. Her brother got shot up 'bout a month ago on the road."

Quentin nodded. "I do know her, though," he said. "That was no bluff. Only she doesn't know me."

"How do you know her?"

"I been ridin' trail with an hombre that's known her from kid days along. Maybe you know him, too. Seen Pete Crosby in these parts lately?"

The man at the bar stiffened. Both he and his companion fixed Quentin with searching eyes. They saw his low-hung guns, his bleak eyes. The one man said:

"Pete Crosby! Where at is he?"

"That's what I was askin' you," Mike Quentin said. "Have a drink?"

They drank with him; but they were evidently more than suspicious. They worked, they said, for the M-Under-the-Roof spread, many miles north of Whitaker.

Quentin accepted a return drink and watched the door of the store opposite until the girl emerged. Then he eased out.

He got Gringo, took the trail out of town. He had marked the direction from which Helen Chalmers had come; and he took that direction when he rode out.

He paced slowly along the trail, eyes brooding. The mere sight of the girl had caused in him a queer sensation. She had worn low, soft boots, high-heeled, spurred, and a split riding skirt. A man's big, soft Stetson, white, that slanted over a mass of hair like burnished copper. Her flesh was tawny-gold with the tan of the open, and her lips a red, tempting curve.

So that was the girl for whom Pete had dared all—the girl he had come back into blazing danger to aid with his gun-hand crippled!

Quentin heard the buckboard overtaking him as he rode slowly along the dusty roadway. It came parallel. He turned and swept off his big hat, swung sideways in his saddle.

He caught a flash of the girl's startled eyes. Deep eyes of sea-blue. Her one hand dropped to a rifle beside her on the seat as she pulled aside; but there was no fear in her eyes.

"Miss Chalmers!" Quentin said. "You won't need the gun. I'm a friend. Will you pull up a minute?"

She brought the team to a halt, but kept her hand on the rifle. It lay half pointed toward him. Quentin smiled.

"How do you know me—my name?" she demanded.

"Easy. You're about the only person I want to know in these parts; so I took good care to find it. And the reason is because I think you can lead me to my partner—Pete Crosby."

She showed that this startled her. "Who—are you?" she demanded, in a breathless voice.

"Mike Quentin—at your service, ma'am. Just out of the country the Mexes call *Pais del Inferno*—Hell's Playground, outside o' Arecibo. Pete and I were compadres down there, and he—"

"Miguel Quentin! You—!"

She stopped. She seemed to be looking at him for the first time. Quentin's eyes met her penetrating look, and at length it was her stare that faltered. He said:

"Maybe you've heard of me, Miss Chalmers." Softly.

She nodded, bit her lip. "Yes," she said, "I have. You let them—do that to Pete—"

She broke off. For a moment there was silence. Then Mike Quentin's cool, restrained voice came.

"I reckon you'll have to believe me or disbelieve me, Miss," he said. "They figured down there, down in Hell's Playground, that they were coming up here and join in raiding the valley spreads. Yours particularly. Pete and I weren't for that at all. Only Pete was fool enough to break out and declare himself. They ended up by hamstringin' his gun-hand. I stayed out. I hadn't much of a chance to get in anyway. I'd just come from town; and when I walked into the shack there was Pete, hands strapped down on the table. And every gun in the place on him and me. They were prayin' I'd make a false move—prayin' for it, and I knew it."

"But—?" She started, then held her question, waiting for him to finish.

"You see, I couldn't have helped him then, and there was no sense in both of us gettin' ourselves killed; we couldn't help you none that way. So I played along, till they let him go. His gun-hand may be gone, but mine isn't. I'm here, Miss Chalmers, to help Pete Crosby do what he started. And hopin'," Quentin added, "that I can make you believe me."

He found her looking at him strangely. Then she moistened her lips, and there came a little flush under the smooth olive of her cheeks, when she said:

"I think I do, Mr. Quentin."

"*Miguel* Quentin!" he laughed, relieved, "down there. Up here, Mike—to you!"

Again she looked at him and flushed. Then: "What do you want me to do?" she asked simply.

"Take me to where Pete's holed up—if you know. I figured you'd know if anyone did."

She nodded. "I do," she said. But she was hesitant.

He understood. "Look here, Miss Chalmers, I savvy. You don't trust me, after what you've heard thus far. I don't blame you, maybe. But you take me to Pete. I'll hand you my guns before we start. After I've seen Pete, I'll take my own chances."

She nodded. "All right," she said. "I won't need your guns. Do you feel like riding to my place with me now?"

"Like nothing better," he assented, gratefully.

She picked up the reins, then stopped. Quentin, following the direction of her gaze, saw a rider cutting across country toward where they were halted. She did not look pleased.

Quentin looked his question when the rider waved his hat at the buckboard.

"This," the girl said, "will be Joyce Gardner. You might as well meet him now."

Quentin's eyes changed. Amber flame lurked curiously in their slate-green depths. Joyce Gardner rode up.

He was a big man, in his middle forties, hale and bluff. He was not bad looking, and he fairly radiated power. His hair was iron gray, clipped short. He shot one imperious look at this stranger in his domain.

Helen Chalmers introduced the men. Neither made an effort to shake hands. But Gardner seemed contemptuous. He addressed himself to the girl, pointedly ignoring Quentin.

"Trouble's coming, and soon, Helen," he was telling her. "I wish you'd let me send some of my boys over to your place. How many riders you got workin' on the spread now?"

"Only one," she said, "beside Salty Grace, my foreman. Up till the time Bob was killed, he and Slim Carter seemed enough. With Salty."

"They probably were enough," Gardner assented. "But these days it's more than just riders are needed. There's raids comin'. I've got word

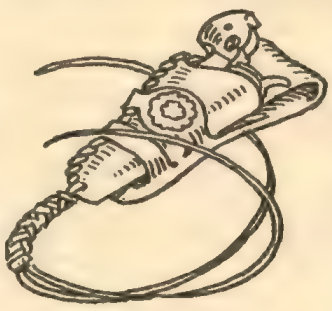
of 'em, and we're all going to be hit, plenty. If I can give you any of my help any time, you know—" Gardner's mount curveted. He flashed a new look at Quentin.

"Stranger, ain't yuh?" he asked, bluntly.

Quentin nodded. "Practically. I've just been hired to ride awhile for the Linked-C, though, so we'll probably be seein' one another, Mister Gardner!"

The girl looked almost as startled as the big cattleman. But she recovered.

"Yes!" she said, then laughed. "If there's as much trouble as you've been warning me about, Joyce, you'll have to admit that I'm heeding the warning. Doesn't Mr. Quentin look as though he could be handy in an emergency?"



Quentin found Gardner's cold eyes on him again. The eyes flicked to the twin guns, the easy litheness of the sinew-packed man sitting the saddle of the black. Gardner nodded.

"Yeah. Sure looks that way. Let's hope the looks ain't too deceivin'. They sometimes are!"

Quentin's eyes blazed for a fractional second; but even with his last word, Gardner had touched spurs and was off.

They looked after him. Finally the girl gathered her reins, smiled at Quentin. He smiled back at her; and in that moment, something intimate and precious passed between them. It was as though they understood one another for good and all.

"Thanks," sighed Mike Quentin, "for the job. Now I'll have to make good."

They started off again, slowly. "I think you will," he heard her say, quietly; but he did not answer.

The rest of that day Quentin was at the Linked-C, and he came to know the two men Helen Chalmers had riding for her. He could not help but like Salty Grace, who had once been foreman of a spread that was measured in uncounted square miles, but who had left now only his dogged loyalty to the daughter of the man he had ridden with when the Southwest was younger even than now.

Slim Carter was the one top-hand. There was loyalty, too, Quentin saw. His pale eyes followed his employer in her every movement, worshiping. But Quentin knew, too, that Carter would never aspire to letting her know his hungry thoughts.

When supper was over, Carter laid a rope on the girl's dun pony and saddled him for her. While Quentin was saddling, he saw that the foreman was doing the same thing.

"Ridin' out with yuh," explained Salty. "Things as they are in these parts now, I'm maybe overkeerful." The foreman lowered his voice and continued: "Don't get the idea that it's on your account I'm trailin' along. If she trusts yuh, I do. But I told her, when her brother died and about the time this range began to get plumb ornery, that unless she let me ride with her any time she rode out after dark, she could get a new foreman."

"Good work, Grace," Quentin applauded. He grinned. "At that, where I'm going, it may be me who'll need help!"

"I reckon," decided Salty, as he swung into his saddle and dragged the girl's mount through the corral gate after him, "that in such a case, you're an hombre who wouldn't yell for it."

The three set out as deep purple shadows commenced to vanquish the rich gold of sunset.

Shorty rode behind, trailing them. The girl and Quentin said little on the ride. They cut off the trail, circled up into the craggier hillsides.

The moon was bright and full, the heavens soft with a hushed softness. Stars pressed down. The lush grass moist with early dew, clung whisperingly to their horses' fetlocks as they rode.

After a long time, the girl said:

"Tell me! I only know that Pete came back, said he knew trouble was coming to the valley. He wanted to hide. I saw his hand and he told me what had happened. I *do* feel sorry for him!"

"There's nothing much to tell," Mike Quentin returned. "I came back from town that day and found Torredos springing on the pack the details of this plan to wipe out the small ranchos of this valley. He and Gardner seem to be silent partners. When it's over, and all your stock 's on the south side of the line, Gardner will step in and clamp down on all of you. He, with his position, wouldn't be at all connected with Torredos, you see."

She nodded. "And Joyce is wanting me to marry him—"

"Oh, he'll be careful of you, all right!" Quentin crisped, savage bitterness in his voice.

"And you?" Suddenly she turned on him fully. "Why are you here in all this?"

He was caught unawares. The nearness of her, her delicious, fragile loveliness, fired him. This was the girl Pete had bartered his soul for! He crammed phrases back in his throat.

"I?" he said huskily. "Why, ma'am, I—"

"It's not 'ma'am'," she told him softly. "If you're going to be Mike and I'm trusting you, it's got to be Helen."

Quentin took a moment to recover. Then:

"All right, Miss—Helen," he said. "I thought I'd told you all of it. Me —I've simply always been wild. Met up with Pete when Pete was on the prod after that shootin' at Malpais."

"I know about that," she said softly. "But you?"

He shrugged. "I reckon I was always just lookin' for things," he said, his eyes brooding. "Just—things. Like you read about in books, maybe. Punchin' cows seemed tame, when I knew there might be action right over the next hill. I guess I just naturally drifted into the company of Torredos. It was on the cards. But when I joined him, he was just pickin' up loose cows here and there, sometimes legitimate and sometimes not, and sellin' maverick beef to one or the other of those bandit armies always loose down there. Nothing like this."

There was silence. He heard her voice again. She was saying: "But still you haven't answered me. You're free. Why are you here, risking your life in a range war, for us?"

He looked at her, looked hastily away. Again words tumbled to be spoken; again he choked them back. He wanted to tell her that, now he had seen her, he had every reason for this fight. That he would like to blaze his two-gun way through any number of minor hells if it would bring him to her. But he didn't.

Shaking his head, grim-lipped, he said: "It's Pete's fight. Pete's fight is my fight. I'm in it because he's in it."

Then his lips closed tightly, and he would say no more. The girl looked at him once or twice, but she did not pursue the question. Her lovely eyes held a glinting mockery in them, though, as they rode on in another kind of silence.

Until Salty Grace's voice wakened them both from a kind of revery. Spurring up to Quentin, the foreman announced:

"We're here!"

They halted.

They were at the bottom of a steep, rock-studded slope. Half way up its sheerness loomed the maw of a cavern. Stunted pinion grew out from

the face of the rock, scraggly prickly pear. It was quiet.

Quentin swung from the black. With only a nod to his erstwhile companions, he started up for the cave, about thirty yards above. They watched him.

There was a shelf jutting in front of the place. It gave a foothold. Quentin's spurs rang on it as he approached the cavern entrance. He made no attempt at silence. They saw him pause, near the cave, and call:

"Pete—it's Miguel. No shootin'!"

There was a growl. Then the watchers saw him enter the black hole.

Pete Crosby and Mike Quentin were face to face once more. In the dark, only their eyes were alive, and a little light from the pale stars, seeping in, showed their bulks to each other.

"Pete!" Quentin called softly. "All right?"

He heard Crosby's husky voice demand: "Why've you come here, Mike?"

"Trailed you here, Pete. I knew I couldn't do anything down there except get both of us killed, if I threw in when Torredos branded you. But I got out afterward. Trailed you here. Came tonight, Pete, to tell you that I'm clear and free to smoke irons alongside you, now."

He could hear Pete's breathing, in the dark. A long silence. He knew, he understood, what Pete was thinking. But he had faith. After all, he and this man were closer than brothers. They could read each other's minds.

Finally Pete said:

"You've seen *her,* eh?"

"She brought me here. I don't blame you for wanting to fight for her, Pete. I'm in now, too. Believe me?"

A long silence; then—

"By God, Mike, I have to! But I —my—!"

"Your hand, Pete; I know," Quentin said, his voice strangely gentle. "I know. But— Look, Pete, there's hell due to bust, only it's not busted yet. Tomorrow I'll get you a new gun and holster from town. You'll have to practise a cross-draw. Wear the iron on your right hip, butt foremost; draw across your body. A few days at it, Pete, and you'll be the same old chain-lightning you always were!"

His voice held conviction. He felt his old partner's hand clamp down on his gun wrist. Heard Crosby's voice:

"*Por Dios,* you're givin' me courage again, Mike! I've got not too long to go—this old lung wound, you know. But we've got to do something for her. With you here—hell, run along, *compadre,* and come back with my gun. Then, when the time comes, we'll ride into action once more. Even if this is due to be about the last time for me!"

They pressed each other's hands, there in the Stygian gloom. Nothing more needed to be said. A word passed was enough, between these two. Only, as he scrambled into the open again, Mike Quentin let fall softly over his shoulder:

"*Manana, amigo mio. . . .*"

The girl found him strangely subdued on the way back. But there was a look of deep understanding in her glorious eyes as she held her dun in against the big black.

They were holding off. The Linked-C, the other small ranches, they all knew. Knew the blow was going to fall, and went along in an agony of suspense, waiting.

It was the old story of the old West. Honest, hard-working cattlemen, striving to wrest an empire out of a new, raw land, and beset by avaricious forces on every hand.

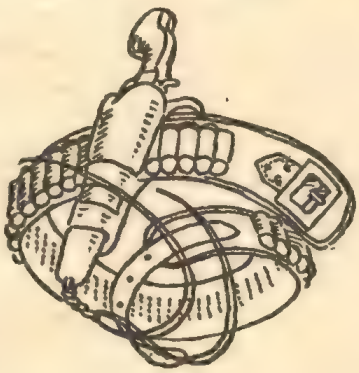
Mike Quentin was spending his time between the ranch and that cavern in the hills. No one followed him on his expeditions there. Salty Grace saw to that; but even he had had no

need to intercept possible trailers. Quentin came and went unheeded.

By the end of the week, though, Crosby had mastered the new draw. He had always been a flash with a gun, had always been known for his speed. That was what made the blow Torredos handed him doubly bitter.

But now, with practise, shells by the box-full, a new, speedy gun with a corrugated walnut grip, Pete was getting the cross-draw down to a science.

Mike Quentin sat watching him fan six shoots all within half an inch of each other, into a tiny target they had made. His smile was enthusiastic.



"It's born in you, Pete, that gun speed," he said, when at length Crosby rested to let his smoking iron cool. "My old man used to say that it wasn't so much the sharp-shooter—it was the man who had the *feel* of his iron. You don't aim. It's your coldness tells you where your lead's going to hit!"

Crosby sat down beside his friend and rolled a cigarette. He lit it.

"Yeah," he said, into the gathering dusk. "Not that I mind so much, now. Maybe, before this lung o' mine calls quits, I'll have my chance at last. If what you say is right," he added. "It's more than a week now, since you told me—"

"What do you mean?"

"Gardner's going to sweep the valley. *Bueno,* that's established, even though we can't prove it, and couldn't do anything about it if we could prove it. We both know Torredos is workin' with him—we ought to! *Bueno,* again. The only thing we don't know, *compadre,* is *when?*"

He looked with a fierce intensity at his trailmate. Quentin spun a cigarette into the rocks at his feet.

"When?" he repeated. "I thought I made you understand that, Pete. We've got a swell chance of knowing when. You remember Esteban Renzo, of Torredos' gang?"

"Why shouldn't I? Why, it was Esteban that Torredos sent out to saddle my cayuse that last night."

Crosby's face became bitter and drawn with the recollection of that scene. Quentin nodded.

"Did Esteban say anything to you then?"

Crosby looked up, puzzled. He started to say something, then cut it short. What—?

"Esteban Renzo," Quentin said quietly, "is *our* man. I've been expecting him to show up here for the last three-four days. It was you who gouged out that rattler bite he had, almost two years ago, treated it with whisky, held him down while you poured raw *aguardiente* into the cut you'd made. Saved his life, then, didn't you, Pete?" Softly, then, as Crosby only nodded, frowning, Quentin went on: "As I said, Renzo is our bet. When this thing breaks, Renzo'll be here to give us warning!"

"You've arranged that?"

"As well as anything can be arranged. I'm counting on his loyalty. I saw what was coming, even before that night. I talked to Esteban. Perhaps he tried to tell you of that when something broke him off that night. That night, it was dangerous for him to seem a friend of ours; *no es?* But when Torredos is ready to strike, when he's got the final word from Gardner, Esteban Renzo'll be riding to find us both!"

"You're a genius!" Crosby declared. "If only Renzo can get away—can find us. If only—but it'll be soon now, eh, Mike?"

Quentin was about to reply when they both stiffened into silence. The clang of steel-shod hoofs on stone came clearly to them from the little

depression under the cavern slope.

It was dark. The guns of both men gleamed. They said nothing, just crouched there with their ready guns. Then a call came.

"Amigos!"

Quentin started, leaped to his feet. Crosby exploded:

"It's Esteban Renzo's voice!"

There was a scramble. A man's figure took shape. Then, scarcely believing their eyes, they saw the slender, wiry figure of the little Mexican materialize at the edge of the rock shelf.

Renzo stumbled toward them, his dark eyes shining brightly through the half-dark. He gripped Crosby by both his arms, peered searchingly into his face. He took Quentin's hand, and said:

"I have come, *con Dios.*"

"I knew you would," Quentin said simply—"if you could. How did you find us tonight?"

For answer, Renzo pointed to the black pit below the rock shelf. They heard a horse move there. He said:

"Senor Grace is down there. He brought me. I knew where to look and I went to him."

Quentin's eyes shone admiration. "Came pronto, then, eh? Just arrived?"

"Pronto! It was necessary!" the Mexican retorted. He drew back. *"Amigos,* it was *necessito.* The raid is before next sunrise!"

Both his listeners started. For a moment they held silent. Then, though neither was aware of it, their hands stole toward their holstered guns.

"Helen—" breathed Crosby. He was looking off to the northwest, toward where nestled the twin spreads of the Tumbling-G and the Forked Stick. Gardner's range.

Esteban Renzo saw his eyes, understood. Softly he said: "Be not angry, *amigos.* Jus' because I know. They plan to raid the woman's range tonight, to make it seem jus' another rustling. Under cover of the raid though, this—how you call him—Gardner? . . . He will take care of the girl!"

"How?" came from the throats of both Americans.

Renzo shrugged. "So! I tell you what I know, and then I wait to hear from you what you want me to do. Thus! Tonight, Manuel Torredos crosses the Border to raid. Tonight he is met by this hombre, Gardner. Gardner will go to the woman and offer her the safety of his hacienda, where he is naturally strong. She will be in his hands. After the raid he make her marry him here, or force her to marry him in Torredos' country of hell!"

"Have you told them this at the ranch?" asked Quentin, breathlessly.

Renzo shook his head. "I tell nothing. I ask only to be taken to you. That is all."

Quentin frowned. Then they did not know yet. The three men stood a long time in silence. The night was very still, the lovely countryside quiet and peaceful. Yet, tonight, this peace was to be rocked with the crash of crimson gun-flame, the curses of hard men, the agony-shrieks of men who would have to die.

At long last, Quentin, lips tight, said:

"Bueno! We know enough. Now I move. You, Pete—you and Esteban go back to the ranch house. I'll see Salty Grace down below and send him with a flaming torch to rouse out the other ranchmen. When—"

He stopped. Crosby was looking at him. Crosby wet his lips and said:

"And you, Mike?"

"Me? I'm ridin' alone. Alone, hear me? To find Joyce Gardner and shoot it out!"

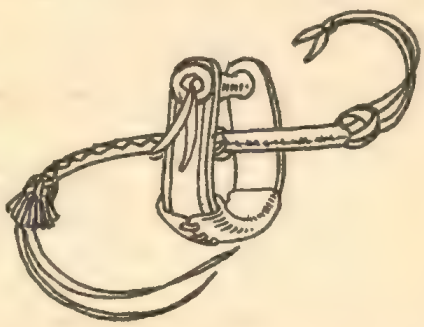
There was a protest; but Quentin had his way. Presently, they all set off together, heading back for the Linked-C. Half way there, riding in a moody silence, they discerned a rider galloping toward them. They drew up, waited.

The puncher drew up his horse, sliding on the animal's haunches. It was Slim Carter, the lone Linked-C hand. The cowboy's face was strained, white. He addressed the grizzled foreman.

"Yuh should'a let me go, instead of you, Salty! After you'd cleared, Joyce Gardner rides up. And she—"

"Quick, man!" Salty gasped, when the cowboy gulped in hesitation. "What's happened?"

"You know she won't do what I say, don't yuh? Well, Joyce Gardner rides up. Some way he must a' got wind of the hunch that we're in on tonight's game. He tells her point-blank that he's got word there's to be a raid on the valley tonight. Exso was with him, that gunslinger. Tells her to let him and Exso take her to his spread, where she'll be safe. To leave us boys here to hold the Linked-C when the raid comes."



For a moment they all sat their horses, stunned. They understood. There had been a leak. Possibly Torredos had noticed Renzo's disappearance, had become wary. Gardner had got word, and had realized that he had overplayed his hand. Now he could not be at all certain of what the outcome of this planned-for night would be. But with the girl in his hands, he would be able to bluff things out some way.

Helen Chalmers was, when the cards were dealt, Joyce Gardner's ace in the hole. A hostage, at least. Or—? They all dreaded to think of the alternative.

They looked instinctively to Quentin, who was still sitting like a rock in Gringo's saddle. His eyes were dull. Finally they saw him nod as though he had reached a decision inside himself.

His voice, too, was dull, when he said: "Let the play lay as I said it. The ranchers'll rally round the Linked-C now. Hold out there; we'll have a trap for the men Torredos sends across, anyway. That end 'll be set, and it's too late for Torredos to know that Gardner's been partially double-crossin' him. Me—like I said—I'm ridin', and alone!"

"For Gardner?" Crosby gasped, hoarsely.

Again Quentin only nodded. "One man's as good as an army in that play," he said firmly. "The big thing is to make a clean sweep of the valley, and this is the big chance. I may get killed at it, but I'll get Gardner. You-all 'll have to play along with the other ranchers." He whirled. *"Adios!"*

Before there could be further protest, the black was streaking away from the group. So dominant was Quentin's personality that, even in his absence, no one spoke of doing other than what he had told them to do. They kept on for the Linked-C.

Quentin rode unhurriedly. His face showed nothing of his thoughts.

This was the showdown. It hurt that Helen hadn't trusted him enough to wait for his word. Hurt to think that she trusted Joyce Gardner more. But, he told himself, he had no reason to blame her. What had he given her, thus far, to prove that he—a stranger—was more trustworthy than the man she had known all these years? Her neighbor.

Quite the opposite he had given her. All she knew of him was what she had heard, and of that dreadful scene that would not be blotted out—before he and Crosby had ridden from Torredos' outlaw hole outside Arecibo. That was all. And that, unless she believed—as he had made Crosby believe—might mean to her that he had betrayed his trailmate to save his own skin. She might believe that. Did she?

Brooding, Mike Quentin became aware that the fast pace he had set Gringo to had brought them close to the Forked Stick ranch house. It was then a change came over him. His big hands flexed and unflexed, he tested the looseness of his shooting irons in their low holsters, ran his fingertips over the loops in the twin cartridge belts. did everything that a born gunfighter automatically does before the moment for action breaks.

Breathing evenly, Quentin looped the reins over Gringo's head, dropped from his saddle, and moved for the doorway.

Suddenly a black figure took shape; it seemed to have slid into being from the shadows about the door. Came a snarl:

"*Que hay?*—What is it?"

Quentin knew the voice, knew that he could not make any answer that would satisfy. This was Salcedo; he could vaguely make out the shape of the gunman's crouch.

He rapped out: "It's Quentin, hombre—and comin' through!"

He needed have said no more. He had had no alternative. Salcedo had been left to guard the door. Who was inside?

Then the blast of Salcedo's gun was in his face. Crimson blotched in front of him. He staggered. Burning pain was searing his left shoulder, where the shoulder joined his neck. It was a numbing, dazing pain.

But his own two guns had spoken. He thought, dully, that he had been almost unaware of them.

The ripping blast of them burned through the hot air. Salcedo was dead.

A roar came from inside the house. Quentin dashed the back of his hand across his eyes. Gunsmoke was acrid in his nostrils. He saw dim forms through the half-open door. He threw himself forward, his spurs raking Salcedo's back unneeding, as he moved.

Red gunflame stabbed out at him. He swept on toward the portal, thumbing his revolvers. A girl's voice came, distorted. Quentin reeled for the doorway.

Glass crashed in the rear of the house. He made for the sound. He burst out of darkness into the semi-gloom of the big ranch-house living room. Only gunsmoke wavered there. His enemies were not in sight. Then he heard a cry.

He whirled. His eyes were dulled, but he was able to perceive, through a haze, that it was Helen Chalmers who was running from the shadows of the far alcove making little, inarticulate sounds. She came to him, caught at his wide shoulders, pressed against him.

He heard her babble: "Mike—oh, Mike, you've come! He just got word—Salcedo brought it—that the raiders were riding into the trap you set for them. He said he was going to ride off with me—down into Mexico—tonight!"

"Where—where's Gardner?" he said, thickly. Salcedo blasted into hell, Exso still alive, but disappeared. Gardner! Where was the real enemy, the enemy who had now lost out on his mad scheme of empire, but who still had to face justice.

Quentin heard the girl.

"He's gone—gone when he heard you coming in. It's all over now, Mike. They—"

"Over, maybe—for you," he muttered. "Not for me. Not for Pete. Not over, it isn't until—"

He stopped, whirled, his hands dropping to his hot guns once more.

"You, in there! Come out easy, or—!"

The girl gave a glad cry. "It's Salty Grace!"

She ran to the door. Stumbling, he followed her. He felt warm blood on him.

He found Helen Chalmers outside, hugging the gnarled form of her foreman. She was babbling the story. He saw Pete Crosby there, too, with Esteban Renzo, in one group.

"We drove 'em off, Mike. They're high-tailin' south, and there's a posse movin' down that way already. But—you're hurt, Mike! Where's Gardner?"

Quentin waved a vague hand. "Got away. Got away—damn his soul!"

Pete Crosby watched. Then Quentin whirled, his eyes savage, upon his trailmate.

"It's a reunion out there, Pete! Reunion! We've served our purpose here. Only one thing more for us to wipe up on now. Come on! Here's your chance to pay off Torredos for that hand of yours. He was beat off, eh? But he's still alive. So is Gardner, and they're not in Mexico yet!"

It was half an hour before either man spoke on the trail. Then it was Pete Crosby who broke the ragged silence.

"Know where you're hittin' for, partner?"

Quentin gave a nod. "Only one place they'd be apt to be now, ain't there? Gardner's licked. You beat off Torredos. Torredos 'll be headin' back across the Line. So will Gardner; he'll have to, now. U. S. can't hold him any longer—not after this night. They'll meet up in Carlos Negros pass. That's the only possible way through to where they're going, unless they want to risk ridin' the whole length of the Border. Keep pushin'."

Hard behind them they heard galloping hoof beats. They did not turn. A moment later, a hail reached them. But they did not stop. It was Esteban Renzo galloping hard behind them, to pull his mount apace with theirs a moment later.

A little later they found it. They were moving up a gradual slope and the pass was a black blot in front of them, when two spaced shots rang across the open.

Renzo's horse screamed and fell. The Mexican leapt free in time, came after them, running. The brooding mouth of Carlos Negros pass mocked at them.

They made out figures. Quentin threw himself from his black just in time. Lead whistled over his head. His left shoulder and arm felt curiously numb; but he came on. He was paying no heed to his companions.

Then they were in the pass mouth. Red gunfire blasted the blackness with livid torture. They could hear Gardner's voice. Yes, Gardner was here; he had managed contact with his Mexican ally.

Gunsmoke burned prodigally. Lead plucked at Quentin's shirt. He knew he had been hit, and more than once. But there was something of inexorable doom in the way he pressed forward—into the black maw there between the blacker rocks.

Dimly he made out the bulky figure of Torredos and saw the raider's gun waver toward him. But in the same moment he saw Joyce Gardner.

Everything else was blotted out. Gardner and he had been enemies from the first moment they had met each other's eyes. Their crimson gunfire seemed jealously apart even from the furious battle around them—as, at long last, their hungry guns leaped at each other.

Quentin felt the impact of more lead. His stride faltered. He staggered forward, dogged. Through a mist he saw Gardner's huge bulk seemingly reach up toward the calm stars, twist misshappenly fully twice before it plunged headlong into the rocks.

Exso materialized out of nowhere. Quentin tried to bring up his smoking guns once more. He was staring into Exso's .45. Then, once more, flame rocked the pass. Renzo, at Quentin's side, had fired a split second before Gardner's gunslinger.

Quentin heard Crosby's gasp: "Torredos! You—and—and me!"

Then, as he dropped to the earth, a new crescendo of violent sound blasted his eardrums, rocked his fading consciousness. He knew that,

somehow, Crosby and Torredos had settled at last though.

It seemed ages before pain began to make itself felt. He knew that Esteban Renzo was there, knew the loyal Mex was forcing raw whisky from a canteen between his taut lips. He opened his teeth and let the fiery stuff pour down his throat.

Renzo raised his head a little. It was an awful scene. Torredos and Gardner, the impassive moon pointed out to them, would aim at Border rule no longer. Already their bodies seemed to be stiffening.

Hoofbeats sounded near at hand. Quentin managed to ask the little Mexican:

"Crosby! Where—?"

A faint groan answered him from near at hand. Pete was propped against the saddle of a dead horse a few yards away. The eyes of the young cowboy were fast glazing. But Pete's grin had its old gameness when he smiled:

"Checkin' out, *amigo mio*. It's a real '*Adios*' this *pasear*. Torredos got the old wounds, the ones I'd been carryin', and helped 'em with some brand-new ones. But—I got that devil first!"

Quentin stifled a groan. On elbows and dragging knees, he forced himself to his friend's side. One look was enough. Pete had not exaggerated. This time it was a real *"Adios!"*

Crosby saw the light of understanding in his trailmate's eyes. His smile was still the same.

"Don't feel sorry, Miguel," he faltered. "It's the way I'd 'a asked for it, after all. I been living on borrowed time too long, anyway. But the borrowed time didn't run out till I'd paid my last—last debt. I'm thankin' the Lord for that. Torredos ham-strung my gun-hand. But it took my pal to teach me that, for a fightin' man—there's always *two* gun hands. So I—I got him!"

With the words, Pete Crosby seemed to have resigned from his battle with life. He put out his hand, pawed until he had caught Quentin's hand. His grip tightened. He smiled. Quentin could hardly hear his last whispered:

"Hasta luego, compadre! . . ."

Quentin was lying there, close to his friend, when the others came up. He could not hear them. Renzo raised himself, warned them. The girl was there, and Salty Grace; a hastily gathered group of ranchmen and their riders, too.

But Quentin paid them no heed. He heard their voices, but his eyes were too misted to see, his brain too dulled to have him care. It was only when he felt the touch of Helen Chalmers' hand on his forehead that he became really aware of them at all. He was still close to Pete Crosby's stiffening form.

Softly the girl was saying: "He went the way he'd have asked to go, didn't he—Mike?" Then, still more gently: "Wiped clean his score, and knew his trailmate was there at the end."

Her eyes were misted, too; but he didn't see. He could feel, though, her arms as they crept about his big shoulders. He could hear her voice and knew it was sweet.

"You've got to stay now, Mike. Mike—dear! You've earned it. That trail through the hell that you and he talked about—that's ended." A hushed pause. Then, close to his ear, her lips said: "Mike, tell me you'll stay—for me!"

His pulses were racing. He found he was trembling, and couldn't understand why. When he looked up at her, he saw her misted eyes. Her face, too, was so deliciously close. He reached up and touched it, as though he were touching something forbidden until now to men like him.

"I'll stay," his husky voice said. "At that, it couldn't have been all hell. That kind of a trail 'd never have led me to you!"

(The End)

IN OLD LAS VEGAS

TRUE FEATURE

By

DICK HALLIDAY

The Virginia Reel on horseback came to a temporary end when the pony came bucking out the door with the drum on his leg—but that horse made history.

TOWN

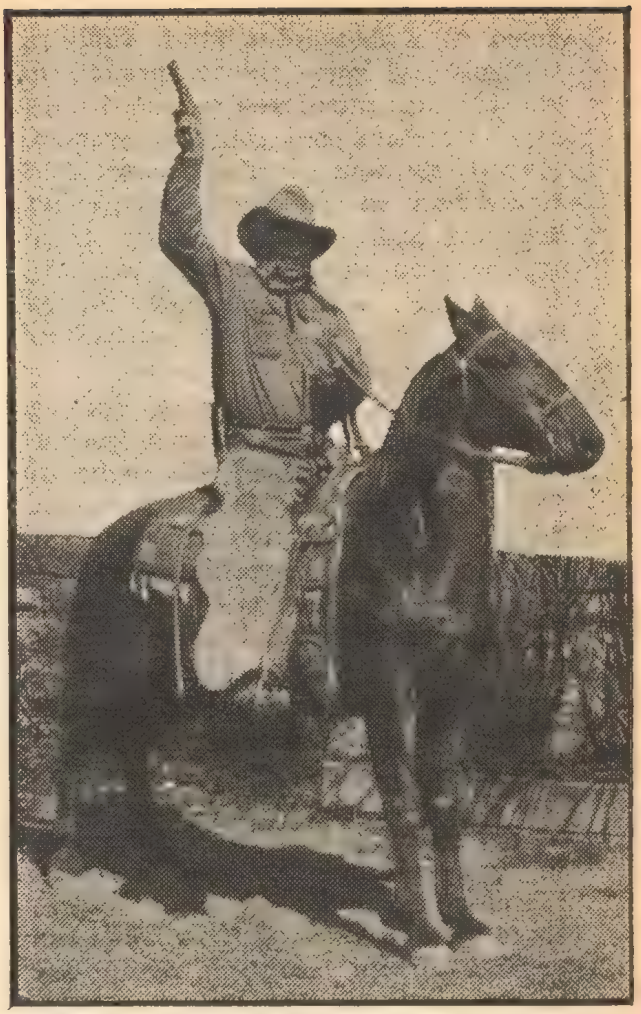
Any Hairpin Who Thinks The Flaming Frontier Of Song And Story Is Dead, Is Hereby Advised To Hang His Hat In San Miguel County, Old Las Vegas Town.

"*Bendito, seá Dios—Mira, Las Vegas.*" Las Vegas, thus the *Fray de las Ascuncion* christened it on that far-off day, back in 1538, when, after weary days of travel over sun-scorched wastes, the small company of Spanish explorers reined up their weary horses and saw the green meadows carpeting the cup-like depression below them. And Las Vegas, The Meadows, it has remained to this day.

An old town, with a romantic, colorful and adventurous past. Even in these prosaic, modern days, that smoldering past has a playful little knack of flaming up again with political unrest, steel-tipped martial law, smoking six-shooters and all the trimmings that go with them.

It was the report of Juan de la Ascuncion and the stories spread by his men of the fabulous riches of the Seven Cities of Cibola which fired the imaginations of the Conquistadores and caused them to seize New Mexico as an outpost of the Spanish Dominions. Being on the natural highway of the Upper Rio Grande Valley, Las Vegas was, even in those early days, a stopping place for camps and caravans. Robed friars (Spain's Soldiers of The Cross) were the first pioneers of civilization to tread the trails which are now the streets of Las Vegas.

They were followed by roving adventurers, soldiers of fortune, whose tales of the northern ranges caused Coronado, in 1540, to lead two hundred mounted knights in armor, attended by seventy-five footmen with a large pack-train, up the Rio Grande and take formal possession of New Mexico. For two hundred and twenty-five years New Mexico slumbered under the royal banner of Spain until, in 1821, Mexico threw off the Spanish yoke and became independent. In 1835, the Republic of Mexico ceded the Las Vegas Grant to the community and the settlement on the Gallinas River became a town under the eagle flag of Mexico.



RUSTLERS HUNT YOUR HOLES—Here is Con Jackson, president of the Cowboys' Reunion Association and Stock Association officer. Con carries the Single Action Frontier Colt. He's tried them all but says: "When I need a gun, it's a gun I want, not a mechanic's job."

In the heyday of the commerce of the prairies, Las Vegas became an important point on the Sante Fé trail. Even then it was known as a tough

town in a dangerous land. Indians, outlaws and horse thieves preyed on the traders, plundered wagon trains, stole livestock and abducted women. Every resident carried arms and knew how to use them. Parties of trappers and buffalo hunters often trailed into town and after cashing in on their skins and furs, staged wild *fandangos* and *fiestas* until their money was gone.

In 1846, General Kearney, leading the army of the West, took possession of Las Vegas in the name of the United States. The little adobe building, from the roof of which the Declaration of Annexation was read, is still standing and is carefully preserved as an historical landmark.

In 1849, the Overland Mail Stage Coach line was started between Independence and Santa Fé, and Las Vegas became an important place on the line. The Overland Mail, starting with one monthly trip, was soon increased to a weekly one, then to three times a week. Finally, nineteen years after its inception, every day in the week saw the Overland pulling up in Las Vegas for a change of horses, a hurried meal and then rolling on its way to Santa Fé. In 1879, the Sante Fé railroad came past Las Vegas and the stage coach and the Overland freight trains vanished from the scene.

With the railroad bringing easy access to markets, came the cowmen and their cowboys and following them hordes of gamblers, saloon keepers, highwaymen, cattle and horse thieves and desperate characters of all kinds. For a long time Las Vegas was known as one of the "saltiest" towns on the trail. Shooting affrays were so common that they ceased to excite any comment whatever. The authorities seemed powerless to control these desperados in any way, and it was not until the cattlemen took hold of the situation in the "eighties" that any improvement was noticeable. These southwestern cowmen were all scions of that fighting breed that first raised the Lone Star Flag and made Texas famous forever in the annals of the West. It was not in them to stand by with folded hands and allow their cattle and horses to be stolen, their men to be robbed and killed when they came to town, without exacting reprisals. "Neck-tie parties" became popular and the early morning sun often shone upon gruesome burdens swinging from the limbs of cottonwoods or from the arms of the old windmill in the *plaza*.

Outbreaks of lawlessness were further complicated by the fact that the leaders and prime movers in cattle and horse stealing were frequently holding the reins of office and even sitting on the judge's bench. One of the most notorious of the latter was "Hoode" Brown, a well known figure in the life of Old Las Vegas.

No one knew where he came from. He descended from the train one day, established himself as a man about town. As he spent his money freely, he was accepted, in the free and easy manner prevalant at that time, at his face value. He soon became prominent amongst the sporting fraternity and then aspired to office and was elected to the bench in 1881.

Right off the reel he secured the appointment of his own gang as peace officers and deputies and ran things his own way until the business element woke up to what was going on. It was the custom of his henchmen to watch out for cowboys, freighters or strangers coming into town with money. It was then an easy job to get the victim "tanked-up" and run him in on a trumped up charge.

Judge Brown administered his office with all due dignity and decorum and when the prisoner was brought before him His Honor would listen gravely to the charge. Then, in impressive tones he would address the victim.

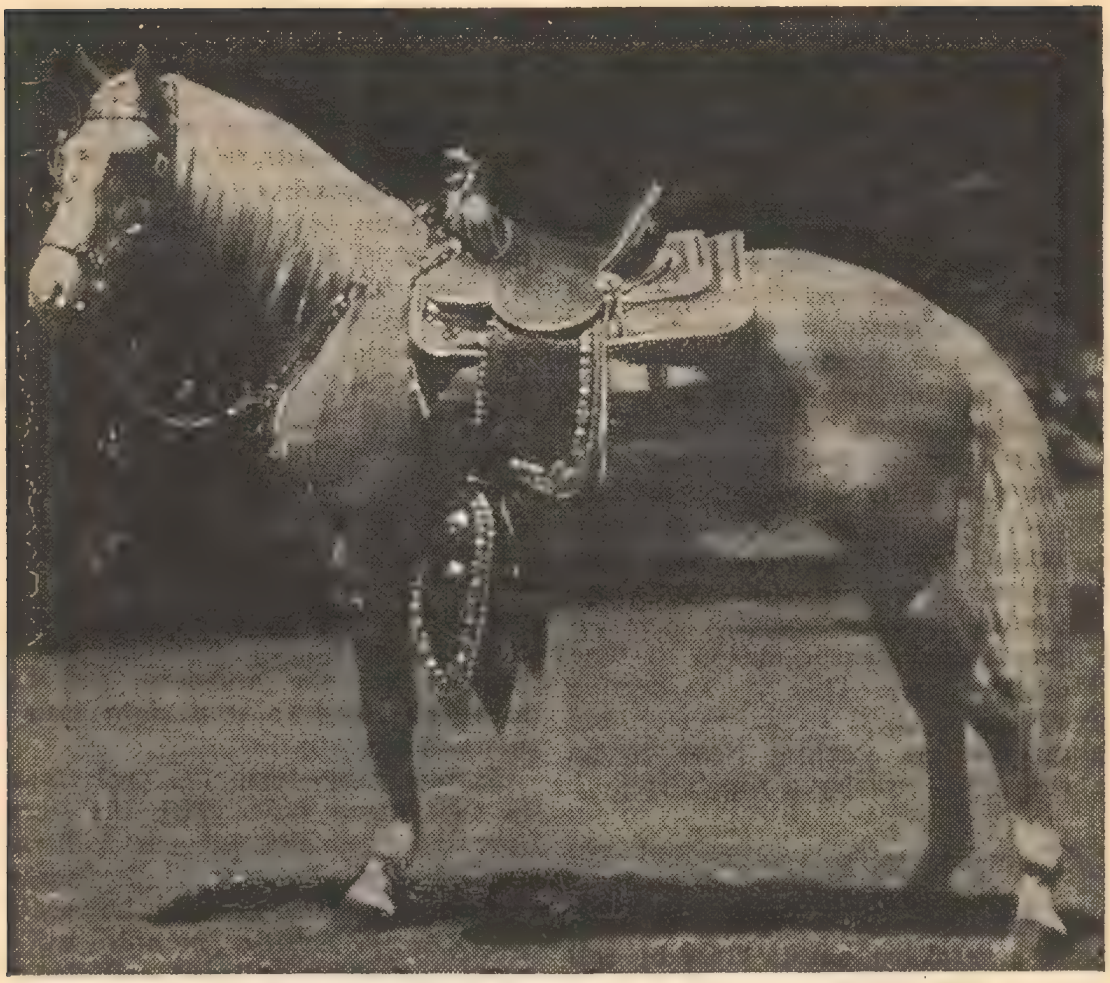


Photo courtesy Karl Obert, Santa Barbara, Calif.

WHERE MEN ARE MEN AND HORSES WEAR JEWELRY—One of the finest specimens of Palomina horse-flesh is this. The animal cost $500, the saddle $1500 and $300 went for bridle and martingale. You take the saddle and bridle, we'll take the horse.

"Young man, stand up and listen to the voice of the Law. The judgment of this court is that you are guilty and that you pay a fine of $100." By a curious coincidence, the fine named was always the sum total of what the unfortunate man carried when arrested. The judge continued, "Then you may leave this town."

In a financial way, things were booming for the judge and his gang, but unfortunately for them, they arrested too many cowboys and freighters before the latter had a chance to spend their money downtown. This braked the wheels of commerce to such an alarming extent that the gentlemen operating the drink dispensaries, the dance halls and card games became seriously perturbed at the unusual financial stringency. They made inquiries and became righteously indignant when they found out what was going on. The aid of the Vigilantes was invoked, the Judge and his gang were given a railway time-table and the injunction to study it. They also received an invite to a neck-tie party to be given in their honor inside twenty-four hours in case they did not appreciate the excellence of the

local train schedules within that time.

For several years Las Vegas was unfavorably known as being the headquarters of the cleverest gang of horse thieves in the state. No man's horses were safe. They even stole the parson's driving horse and made away with a fine buggy team belonging to a judge of the Supreme Court. But, like Judge Brown, the thieves over-reached themselves and thus upset their own apple cart. They helped themselves a bit too freely to the best horses that the ranchmen owned. Now students of Western ways and customs may sometimes differ on a point of fact, but all agree on one point—that any interference with a cowboy's saddle horse can only be compared to playing with capped dynamite. The indignant ranchmen organized the San Miguel Horse Thieves Protective Association (still in existence) and shortly horse stealing came to an abrupt end—usually a rope's end.

Cowboys always were—and still are—as plentiful in Las Vegas as chickens on a roost. There were several big outfits close by and the boys always did like to vary the monotony of riding the range by frequent visits to town. In those days, Rodgers Brothers had a blacksmith's shop and corral down by the bridge over the Gallinas River, and very often some outfit would bring in anywhere round thirty or forty broncs to be shod. Placed in the corral they would be roped out and taken over to the shop in batches of four at a time, fastened in the stocks and shod. When the work was finished the riders would naturally head downtown for a good time.

It was a favorite stunt with the men of one outfit, who prided themselves on their pool-playing ability, to carry out a billiard table from one of the saloons, into the *plaza*, buy barrels of beer and entertain the town with open air billiards. Bets were made on the games, beer was ladled out, traffic in the *plaza* was suspended and everybody had a good time.

There was a very large dance-hall on one side of the *plaza* and an old-time resident still tells the story of the big equestrian ball. A party of cowboys, in town for a good time, got tired of trotting round on foot, so departed, *en masse*, for their ponies, mounted the girls on borrowed horses and engineered a Virginia Reel on horseback. Things were going very well and the cowboys were having the time of their lives until the thundering rataplan of hoofs on the plank floor and the music of an emergency brass band excited an evil tempered little *alazan* pony belonging to one of the Harrels, of Lincoln County War fame. He backed into the orchestra and his horse managed to step right into a snare drum.

Instantly pandemonium broke loose in that dance hall. With the drum fast to his leg, that pony bucked and bawled until the rest of the horses caught the contagion and joined in. The din was terrific, the noise was a cross between a railroad collision, a foundry in full blast and the Battle of Gettysburg thrown in for good measure. The whole town flocked to the scene to find out what was going on and saw pony after pony buck furiously out of the door into the *plaza* with a whooping, grinning rider in the saddle.

The sheriff, his deputies, the town constables, the business men and residents were all there and all demanding to be informed of what was going on. "A Virginia Reel on horseback," they were told and the idea caught the fancy of the townfolk. There was a general saddling up of horses all over the town. The dance-hall orchestras combined their forces for the auspicious occasion. Double, then treble and finally quadruple lines of riders formed in the *plaza* and the ball was on with the sheriff

acting as Master of Ceremonies. There was no lack of ladies. Vivid Mexican *señoritas*, picturesque in plumed hats and long riding skirts, were there on their side-saddled ponies. Even those of the ranchmen's wives and daughters who lived in the town, saddled up and joined in.

Keeping time to the rolling music of the drums, the brazen clang of cymbals and the blare of trumpets, the riders whirled and backed and side-stepped their horses up and down the torch-lit *plaza* until long after midnight. It was a great night in Old Las Vegas Town on that evening when Tom Harrell's little sorrel stepped through that drum and started the ball a-rolling.

Las Vegas is a "twin town," New Town and Old Town. "East" and "West" Las Vegas as the post office department had them listed up to a short time ago. Cut in half by the Gallinas River, the *nativos* dwell in Old Town and the *gringos* hang up their hats in New Town. Each town has its own separate government, police force, fire department, city hall and post office. Then Las Vegas became the county seat of San Miguel and a keen rivalry started up between the two towns to see which side of the river the county courthouse should be built on.

Old Town won and the county courthouse site was selected, surveyed and laid out while New Town made the welkin ring with outcries of court injunctions, mayhem, murder, bribery and corruption.

Work was scheduled to begin on the new building on a certain day. When that day rolled round and the workmen turned up, they found the site had been located and pegged out as mining claims and the locators were hard at work, excavating, washing and panning out gold. And all these miners came from New Town.

When Old Town recovered from the stunning shock it buzzed like a swarm of bees. The sheriff, deputy sheriffs, marshal and constables flaunted many deadly weapons and talked much of the majesty of the law and the super-sanctity of courthouse sites in general and that one in particular. But the miners merely bit off a fresh chew of "Battle Axe" and went on mining. Under mining laws, any citizen could locate a mining claim anywhere and hold it, especially when he was actually getting gold out of it. And under the shocked and incredulous eyes of Old Town, these miners were doing that very thing. In the meantime, New Town was taking steps to set the machinery of the law in motion to delay building and secure that courthouse for their own side of the river.

Then indeed Old Town smelled a rat somewhere—an exceeding large and dead one, too. Investigation of the ground surrounding the site failed to discover the slightest trace of gold. Judicious diplomacy, for which the Latin race is so justly famed, free and gratis distribution of bottles filled with various potent fluids finally caused indiscreet *gringo* tongues to wag, and thus was the nefarious plot laid bare. New Town hoped to get a court decree giving her that courthouse site, basing her claim on corrupt electoral practices in the shape of stuffed ballot boxes and padded electoral rolls. In order to hold up building operations until the decree could be obtained, certain of her loyal sons had filed claims, salted those claims with gold and then proceeded to extract that gold, thus justifying their illegal activities in the eyes of the law.

Such perfidy caused the hot Latin blood of Old Town to bubble to the boiling point. The younger element were noisy in their demand that the intruding *gringos* be summarily eliminated from the earth, but calmer counsels prevailed. "Fight fire with fire," advised the oldsters, "the locators are mining under the protection of the law, we must remove them by legal means."

A Justice's court was convened, floods of impassioned oratory poured out on the presiding J. P. Very much bewildered as to legal technicalities, but firm and unswerving in his determination that justice should be done Old Town, the judge finally gave his decision.

The interlopers, he decided, had broken the law by filing on land wherein minerals did not exist and to bolster up their claims, they had fraudulently salted the claims pegged out. Therefore they were trespassing malefactors who must be summarily removed to their own side of the river.

And as the Justice ordered, so was it done. Old Town descended, *en masse*, man, woman, dog and cat, on the intruders, forced them off the site by pressure of numbers, crowded them down the street, hustled them across the Gallinas River and returned in triumph to the *plaza* where they assisted in laying the foundations of the Hall of Justice for San Miguel County.

Dating from the settlement of the courthouse argument, there was an era of such peace and prosperity in Las Vegas as was without parallel in its history. Cowboys and freighters came to town, transacted their business and dispensed their wealth with a liberal hand for monte, whiskey and quadrilles for which Las Vegas is so justly famous. The business element rejoiced greatly but pessimistic ones, and those grown gray on the western side of the Rockies, forecast gloomily that calamity was on its smoky way.

The summer faded into fall but nothing untoward marred the idyllic peace of the town. Then up from Silver City and the Fort came the big, jerk-line teams to load up with supplies which came to Las Vegas on the railroad. The freighters had money, were eager to spend it and

LAWMEN ALL—Officers of San Miguel County, with their horses in the lobby of the Meadows Hotel, Las Vegas. Left to right: Brite Bagley, Warren Shoemaker, Frank Springer, Con Jackson, Burton Brown, Sheriff Delgado, Jim Whitmore—and on the horse, Dick Halliday, the author.

business rejoiced in a boom which caused the freighters to be received as public benefactors,

The wagons and teams were corraled down in New Town, which, as it possessed the railway depot, was the abode of commerce in so far as commerce embraced the vulgar necessities of flour, sugar, beans, salt pork and other goods usually purchased by the wagon load. The real marts of trade, the social palaces of delight, were situated in Old Town. Between its *plaza* and the corrals was a long hiatus of badly lighted streets in which dark stretches predominated.

Freighters and cowboys visiting Las Vegas held fixed opinions, not founded on surmise, which were the reverse of complimentary concerning those same dark places. So, at the close of an evening's festivities in Old Town, well informed *gringo* visitors were in the habit of combining forces and journeying down to New Town in company and safety.

On this particular occasion, as the Silver City men were traversing a dark section, they were suddenly brought to a halt by a deep, hollow, soul-chilling groan. Then followed the fearsome *clank-clank-clank* of rattling chains and a blood-curdling burst of maniacal laughter. Before the startled men could even wonder what was happening, a ghastly specter descended on them, apparently out of the empty air. Even in the darkness, they could see its white, fearsome form swaying down on them.

Snowball, the black cook, let out a screeching wail of terror. "A h'ant," he yelled. "Oh, gorry, a h'ant. Run!" Startled by the sudden apparition, perhaps slightly fuddled by the potent libations of the evening, the freighters took Snowball's advice and ran. In deference to the by-laws of Las Vegas, which frowned on six-shooters as being superfluous articles of adornment not to be worn inside the town limits, they were unarmed. Had their Colts been on their hips instead of reposing inside their bedrolls, doubtless that ghost would have been weighted down with leaden ballast.

As it was, they electrified Old Town by arriving in the *plaza* on the dead run, Snowball well in the lead and screeching like a runaway circus calliope. It was some little time before Old Town could be made to understand the matter, but when they did, no time was lost. A party of men, heavily armed, each one carrying a lantern and each one well bolstered up internally with "Dutch courage," set out to convoy the freighters down to the corral. Each man in the escort promised dire things as being due to happen to the ghost and each man in that party kept close to each other.

No ghost materialized on the way down to the feed corrals. But when the escort returned to Old Town there was another tale to hear. The biggest drink dispensary on the *plaza* was packed full of *nativos*, their women and *niños*. The men were talking nineteen to the dozen, the women telling their beads and the *niños* whimpering in fright. It was the ghost, they explained to the sheriff and his shot-gunned deputies. A fearsome apparition, with gleaming eyes and clanking chains, which had promenaded along past the backs of their houses, chilling their blood with demonical laughter and hollow groans.

Old Town was in a ferment, it was nearly morning before the frightened folks could be persuaded to go home. New Town listened to the yarn with delirious delight and voiced insinuations, more or less veiled, anent spirits-of-the-bottled kind. Small boys tingled in delicious terror. The hardware stores did a land office business in shotguns, ammunition, bolts, locks and bars. The town ordinance against packing deadly weapons was unofficially suspended, for, had it been enforced, all Las Vegas would have

been incarcerated in the *jusgado.* Even the judges themselves were freighted down with lethal hardware. Crosses were painted on the doors. Men talked valiantly of what they would do. *Señoras* and *señoritas* wore out the strings of their rosaries telling their beads and peeked hastily underneath their beds before they blew out the candles.

The story traveled down to Silver City and the next trip the freighters made, they carried so many firearms that settlers along the highway thought the Indians had taken to the warpath again. But the ghost walked no more. Never, from that day to this, has the mystery been solved.

John Hollingsworth Halliday—better known to posterity as "Doc" Halliday—famed in the Old West for his skill with the pasteboards, the gloomy fatalism of his views and the deadly surety of his gun-hand, tarried in Las Vegas for a brief while.

Doc was a professional man, that is to say, he owned a dentist's diploma, but as there existed little call for dental services in the Old West, he took to cards. Handling cards is, contrary to the viewpoint of a supercilious East, quite a respectable business in the West, and the Doc speedily became one of the shining lights of the frontier.

Doc was sitting in at Colorado Charley's faro game when a big, blustering gambler, whose name has not come down to us, sized up the mild-mannered newcomer as being an easy mark. At that moment, a stack of chips, pushed forward by Doc, was inside what faro players call the Big Square. That they were coppered and belonged to another man did not deter the blusterer. He claimed them and reached out for them. It was unheard of conduct and Doc Halliday felt impelled to politely reprove the fellow. In reply the bully flashed a gun.

Whereupon Doc promptly answered in kind and shot the gambler twice in the head. The ill-advised action of the departed one had placed him so far outside the law that the sheriff's office took no notice of the matter and the unofficial verdict of the coroner's jury was that the deceased had deliberately committed suicide.

Inasmuch as the Doc paid for the burial of the defunct—as he always did in such cases—it was considered that not the slightest implication rested on his character. When he left for Tombstone it was with the intimation that the town would be pleased to see him when he came north again.

Las Vegas today is still a double-barreled town. New Town and Old Town are yet two separate communities even though Uncle Sam insisted on shutting up one post office for reasons of economy and then building a new one to serve both towns—as a matter of political expediency. It is quite true that modern Las Vegas is parked, groomed and boulevarded, but the hardware establishments still carry plentiful supplies of the ironmongery turned out by the Colt and Smith and Wesson factories. Cowboys are no strangers on her streets today. Monte, faro and poker, although frowned on by the big bowwows of the town, can still be had when desired. Quadrilles—for which the town used to be famous—are frequently put on by Dee Bibb and his cowboy orchestra. Even the fine old art of rustling cows is still practiced and does not the Governor of the State declare martial law and send the National Guard to garrison Las Vegas every time a presidential election comes off?

Any doubting Thomas who thinks the Old West, the West of the flaming frontier of song and story, is dead and buried is hereby advised to shift to San Miguel County and for a year or so, hang up his hat in Old Las Vegas Town.

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The Gold Diggers

It Turned Out that They Both Wanted a Stake of a Hundred Thousand Dollars—To Marry the Same Girl!

BUCK SUMMERS scraped the last particle of loose gravel from the bottom of the shaft and shovelled it into the bucket. "Take it away!" he called, and flattening himself against the frozen wall as the rope tightened, watched the heavy bucket rise swaying toward the mouth of the shaft some eighteen feet above him.

The windlass ceased creaking, a strong hand seized the bucket, and Buck heard the rattle of gravel on the frozen dump. The empty bucket descended rapidly, thudded on the bottom of the shaft, and shovel in hand, Buck stepped into it, and again he called: "Take it away!"

A few moments later he stood on the lip of the shaft and eyed the rapidly rising

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Constable Pogue Gets His Man," "Goldie" and Many Other Stories of the Far North.

waters of the creek. "Good gosh!" he exclaimed. "This must be the break-up, all right! No use trying to thaw down any deeper. The shaft'll be flooded before morning."

Bill Strang nodded. "Yeah. She's been rising fast the last hour. A lot of loose ice went by, I expect it jammed and dammed the crick up on some bend. Another two feet'll put it in the shaft."

"Yeah, an' four feet'll float our woodpile away. We'd better move it to higher ground."

"I don't think it'll rise four feet," speculated Bill. "The ice jam'll let go before that, or the crick will cut a channel around it."

"Guess you're right," assented Buck. "Anyhow, we won't do any more digging till the water goes down."

"It's going to be a hell of a job bailing that shaft out with the bucket. It's

eighteen, twenty feet deep, and six feet across, that's——"

"Never mind the figures," grinned Buck. "I don't want to know how many buckets it holds. When the time comes, we'll just keep cranking and dumping till we get it empty. In the meanwhile, we've got to get busy and build our sluice. If this is the real break-up, we'll let the water stay in the shaft till we sluice out our dump. I'm anxious to know what we've got to show for our winter's work. And believe me—it's been work, too—if anybody should ask you!"

"On the basis of the test panning," began Bill, "we've been taking out better than wages. We've been at it seven months, and we've piled up, on an average, say——"

"To hell with basises and averages!" cut in Buck. "Sluice out the dump, and weigh up the dust. That's the way to find out how we've been doing. It's lucky we brought in the lumber while we could still use the poling boat last fall."

REPAIRING to the little pole and mud cabin, built close against the rim wall, the two cooked and ate their supper, washed the dishes, and bent their heads over a crudely pencilled sketch which they spread out on the rough little table.

"The sourdoughs are all right," opined Bill. "The way they make cracks about the chechakos, and laugh at 'em, and poke fun at 'em, you'd think they hated anyone that wasn't born and raised within spitting distance of the north pole. But shucks—Old Bettles sold us the boards for the sluice out of his own pile, and he didn't stick us for 'em, either. And Moosehide Charlie drew out this plan so we could build our sluice, and Camillo Bill and the rest—they told us how to go about burning in, and how to sluice out our dump in the spring, and about locating where we wouldn't need much of a flume. I like the sourdoughs. I think they're a damn fine bunch of fellows."

"You bet they are! And you can't blame 'em for making fun of the chechakos. Most of 'em are damn fools. We saw enough of 'em from Dyea Beach clear down to Dawson. The reason the sourdoughs were willing to help us out is because we didn't ask 'em a lot of fool questions. And when they told us how to go at a thing, we didn't argue with 'em about it, and try to tell 'em a better way. We went ahead and did like they said. About this sluice, now—spreading these legs wide, and lashing 'em in place, saves digging holes in the frozen ground."

"Sure—and we better carry in those moose hides an' thaw 'em out so we can cut 'em into strips. It's a good thing they told us about saving those hides for lashing. Spikes and bolts sure come high in this country. If we build the sluice just below the dump, we won't need much of any flume."

SUMMER, in the sub Arctic, follows winter with startling abruptness. Snow melts from the hillsides and from the valleys. Creeks burst their icy bonds and become rushing torrents carrying uprooted trees and ice cakes which, jamming in the bends, back up the water turning lowlands into lakes whose ever increasing pressure finally tears out the jam and sweeps the debris onward to form another jam at another bend. Then the waters subside, green shoots appear, and south slopes blaze with the red, and blue, and yellow of wild flowers.

Sloshing about in rubber boots, flannel shirts open at the throat, the two partners toiled at their sluicing. Day by lengthening day, the dump diminished in size, the tailing pile grew, and the mooseskin sack that held the yellow grains became heavier and heavier.

Came a day when the last of the gravel rattled in the sluice box. The partners cleaned up their riffles, and added the precious particles to their hoard.

"We'll weigh her up, now," said Buck, "and find out where we stand. It sure don't bulk up very big. Gold's heavy."

"Yeah," admitted Bill. "I estimate that——"

"Never mind estimating. Here's the scales. Come on—I'm getting anxious to know what we've made!"

Eagerly, the two filled the pan of the little balance scales, emptied it, tabulated the result, refilled it, and repeated the process until no more yellow grains remained in the moosehide sack. Then, pencil in hand, Bill announced the total.

"Six hundred and fifty-six ounces," he announced. "That's three hundred and twenty-eight ounces apiece, and that figures up to five thousand two hundred an' forty-eight dollars—almost exactly seven hundred and fifty dollars a month for the seven months we've put in here."

"That's good wages," admitted Buck. "We couldn't make wages like that in Seattle. I was getting sixty a month in the hardware store."

"And I was getting seventy-five in the bank. But—I'm not satisfied with wages—no matter how good they are. I want to make a strike!" He figured rapidly for a moment, and continued. "Cripes, at this rate it'll take just eleven and one ninth years to make a hundred thousand dollars—not counting expenses. And they're plenty, with the prices the way they are—and the sourdoughs say they're going up. They claim the stampede we came in on is nothing to the stampede there'll be this year. Only a few people knew about those fellows that brought the gold down on the Portland. But, by now, everyone in the United States knows about it—and they'll be swarming into the country like flies."

ARE you going to quit when you get a hundred thousand dollars?" asked Buck.

"Yeah—that's a lot of money. I'll be going back to Seattle then. I suppose you'll stay on here till you make a million."

"No. Funny, isn't it? But a hundred thousand is exactly the amount I'd decided to quit on. I'd hate to take eleven years to make it, though. Gosh—a fellow would be old."

"I'd be thirty-one."

"I'd be thirty. Funny thing—life. Here you and I are—pardners, way up here in the Yukon—and we've lived all our lives right in the same town, and never knew each other. How'd you come to quit your job and hit north, anyhow?"

"Well," answered Bill, "it was on account of a girl—we're going to be married when I make a hundred thousand."

"Here, too," said Buck. "My girl read in the paper about the Portland, and all the gold those miners brought down from the north. She's ambitious. Said she never could marry a plain clerk. Said the man she married must have at least a hundred thousand dollars. Then she showed me that piece in the paper. I knew I'd never make a hundred thousand in Seattle, so I quit my job and caught the next boat north."

"I guess women are all alike," observed Bill. "My girl told me the same thing—and just about in the same words. You can't blame 'em. No woman wants to be poor unless she has to."

"Sure they don't. I'm doggone glad I came. I'd never had made seven hundred and fifty a month in the hardware business."

"Nor I wouldn't in the bank—unless I robbed it. Anyway, not for years and years and years. And by that time Mabel would have found someone that had a hundred thousand and married him. You couldn't expect a girl to wait for ever."

"That's the way I figured it. Funny—my girl's name's Mabel, too. Her eyes are blue—like corn flowers. And she's got the prettiest yellow hair."

"So has Mabel. She's office girl for old man Whipple, the lumberman."

"What!" The word cracked like a pistol shot, and Bill looked up from his figures, to see Buck staring at him, wide-eyed.

"Yeah, she lives on Washington Street—out past the lake."

"What's her last name?" asked Buck, in a flat, toneless voice.

"Jenkins. Her dad's a broker."

BUCK smiled bleakly. "Junk dealer. calls it broker—it sounds better. You can't blame her. She——"

"You know her?" exclaimed Bill.

"I ought to. She's the girl I'm going to marry."

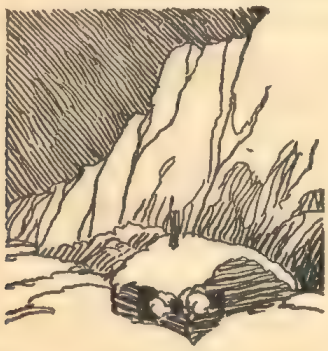
"Like hell you are!"

"Well—one of us is. I'm betting it'll be me."

"You'll lose! You haven't got a chance. She's told me, time and again, she loves me."

Buck smiled benignly. "I'm sorry for you, Bill. It's me she loves. She's just been stringing you along—so's not to hurt your feelings. She sent you up here so you'd be far away from her, and forget—while I'm making my hundred thousand."

"Like hell she did! Look at it sensibly—it's you she sent away while I make the hundred thousand to get married on. Why—I've been going with her for most a year—every Tuesday and Friday evening!"



"Mondays and Thursdays are my evenings."

"We've got to bust up pardnership. It's too damn bad! We've got along fine. But—everything's different now."

"Yeah," agreed Buck. "We can't go on living like this. It's—it's bigamy or something. We can't both marry her—and if we stayed pardners, we'd get the hundred thousand at the same time."

"The world isn't big enough for both of us, from now on!" opined Bill sombrely.

"If it was in the olden times we could fight a duel—like James Fitz-James and Roderick Dhu," said Buck, the light of romance in his eyes.

"Well—they did it in this country, too. Look at Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. And in the South they fought duels right up till the civil war."

"That's right. We'll fight one. And the one that's left, can have her—and all the pardnership dust, too. It'll help along toward the hundred thousand."

"Sure, Buck. That's fair enough. But about the duel—I don't know exactly how——"

"It seems like we ought to have seconds, or something."

"We'll have to get along without 'em," said Bill. "There's no one within forty miles of us. And besides, it seems to me dueling is against the law, or something. It would be too bad if the one that was left got hung."

"Yeah," agreed Buck. "If I'm the one to fall on the field of honor, Bill, promise me you'll bury me up there under those blue flowers. They'll remind me of her eyes."

"Sure, Buck. And if I'm the one to lay down my life for Mabel, you bury me there under that patch of yellow flowers. They'll remind me of her hair."

"Yeah. I was trying to remember about duels. Let's see—the aggrieved party challenges the other one, and then the one that's challenged is supposed to select the weapons."

"That's right. But in a case like this, who's the aggrieved party?"

"Why—I am. You're trying to horn in on my girl."

"She ain't your girl!" retorted Buck hotly. "She's mine!"

"One party used to slap the other's face and then he'd get challenged," opined Bill, and suiting the action to the word, he leaned forward and delivered a lusty flat-hand slap squarely upon Buck's mouth.

THE next instant Buck's fist crashed against his jaw, and in the mêlée which followed the interior of the little cabin was all but wrecked as the two punched and jabbed, and rolled about the floor in a clinch that overturned table and benches, and left them finally panting and blowing, with their heads beneath the edge of the bunk.

"You ought to have challenged me; not socked me," said Bill reproachfully from between puffed lips. "I was trying to get it started right."

"Any time you slap my face you'll start something, damn quick!" retorted Buck, blowing blood in a fine spray from his nose.

"The duel, I mean," mumbled Bill, inching his head from beneath the bunk, and sitting up. "Gosh, Buck, one of your eyes is plumb shut!"

"One of yours is turning black," replied Buck, rising to one knee and applying his handkerchief gingerly to his bleeding nose. "What the hell did you slap me for?"

"Why, to get the duel started. You were supposed to challenge me, and instead of that you socked me in the jaw with your fist."

"Oh," said Buck, feeling his puffed eye with his finger tips. "Well, I'll challenge you now."

"It's too late," explained Bill. "You ain't the aggrieved party any more. Your sailing in and fighting puts us back on the same footing as we were before I slapped you."

"You mean," inquired Buck, "that you've got to slap me again?"

"Well—one of us ought to slap the other—or something. How the hell we going to get this duel started, if we don't?"

"That's so," admitted Buck. "If it wasn't for Mabel I'd never let you do it. Go ahead and slap—but slap easy—and be damn sure you don't touch my nose or eye—they're sore as hell. If you do I'll knock the living daylights out of you!"

He extended his jaw, with muscles tensed, and reaching out, Bill administered a merely nominal slap, being careful to avoid the injured nose and eye. "There now—you can challenge me."

"All right," announced Buck gravely. "I challenge you to fight a duel."

"I'll accept," answered Bill with equal gravity. "And since that leaves me the choice of weapons, I'll choose the rifle—at twenty paces."

Buck sat for a moment in deep thought. "But—hell," he ventured, "that don't leave me anything but the butcher knife. Or throwing rocks, or something. And at twenty paces——"

"That's so," interrupted Bill. "You'd be handicapped."

"That's the way it looks to me. But—a duel's a duel, Bill. I'll go through with it. You tell Mabel I was game——"

"We've got to figure some other way," interrupted Bill. "It would be more like murder than a duel. I'll tell you what we'll do. There's only the one rifle—we'll flip a coin to see who gets it. That's as fair for one as it is for the other."

"Yeah—but even then, it would be kind of like murder. One of us would have to shoot the other——"

"He might miss. Neither one of us are very good shots."

"Yeah, but—at twenty paces," said Buck doubtfully. "And there's three or four boxes of shells. It don't stand to reason either one of us would miss a couple of hundred times—at that distance."

"That's so," admitted Bill. "How about using knives?"

Buck shook his head. "I never read of 'em fighting duels with knives in the olden times."

"They used swords—and a sword is nothing but a long knife."

"That's so. But—we've only got one long knife."

"We could use our jack knives."

"My big blade's busted."

"That's so," admitted Bill. "I'd forgot. Anyhow, it would be a messy job—killing each other with jack knives. One of us

has got to die, Buck. The world ain't big enough for both of us."

"It's like this," said Buck. "We want this duel to be all fair and regular. We owe it to Mabel that the one she gets won't have the taint of murder on him."

"Sure."

"The only way I see is for us to divide up our stuff and quit pardnership. We'll both leave this crick. One of us will take the rifle, and the other can buy one. Then we'll separate, and it'll be understood between us, that wherever we meet, we'll step off twenty paces and begin shooting, and keep on shooting till one of us falls."

"Okay," said Bill. "Providing it isn't in any town, or camp where they might try to stop us—or arrest the one that was left."

"Sure," agreed Buck. "We'll hit for Dawson, and get our separate outfits, and then hit for the hills. And from that moment on, we're deadly enemies."

"Shake," said Bill. "Come on—let's roll in. We'll be getting an early start for Dawson."

II

ALONG toward the middle of June a prospector stopped at Buck's camp on a creek, some seventy miles back from Dawson, and rested up for a few days. He said that he and his partner had wintered in the mountains to the eastward, but they hadn't taken out wages. His partner had struck eastward toward the Mackenzie, and he was heading for the Yukon. He spoke of a lone prospector who was sniping the bars on a creek back in the foot hills, some thirty miles to the eastward.

"Doin' purty good at it, too, accordin' to his tell," said the man. "I tried my luck above him, an' below him, but I didn't do no good. Seems like he's got the only good bend on the crick."

"Beats hell," opined Buck, "how these old prospectors seem to know right where to locate a good claim."

"He ain't an old fella. He's about like you. Jest happened to strike it lucky there where he's at. He claimed him an' his pardner busted up this spring on account of some woman or other. Claimed they done pretty well—but not good enough to suit 'em. Claimed his pardner was a swell guy—but he was goin' to hunt him up an' kill him, an' take the dust both of 'em had saved, an' go back to Seattle an' marry this here woman. I figured he was kind of screwy, so I come away from there."

"Oh, he's all right! He's my pardner. Nothing the matter with him, except he kind of got the cart before the horse, as the saying is. You see, it's me that's going to kill him, and take the dust and the girl. Poor Bill—he's a damn fine fellow. I'll be sorry to see him go."

"Yeah," said the man, edging over to his pack and shouldering it. "Jest a couple of pals, eh? Well, so long—I better be headin' along towards Dawson."

FOR a month after the man's departure Buck worked his creek, pan washing at the bars and eddies. Each evening, as he added the day's panning to his pouch, his thoughts were upon the girl with the corn flower eyes. In his mind's eye he performed prodigious feats of valor, while she looked proudly on. He calculated that he was doing a little better than he and Bill had done, winter mining. But even so, it would take a long time to save a hundred thousand dollars. He wished that Mabel could be happy with, say—twenty-five thousand—or even fifty. There certainly was nothing cheap about Mabel.

Then, one day, he panned nearly five thousand dollars from the gravel at the bottom of a swirl behind a rock in a rapid. Five thousand dollars! And—there were lots of rocks!

That evening he weighed up his dust and found that it ran well over twelve thousand dollars. At five thousand a day —seventeen or eighteen more days would be all he'd need! He could be back in

Seattle and married by the first of September! Poor old Bill—he'd be plugging away up his crick, and not know anything about it. He and Mabel would probably have kids in school before Bill got his hundred thousand. But he was glad he didn't have to shoot Bill, anyway. Reaching into his pocket he drew out a cheap photograph and studied it with adoring eyes. It showed a simpering blonde artificially posed beside what appeared to be a balcony of massive marble. Turning the picture over he read aloud: "To Buck dear, with love from Mabel."

A DISTURBING thought creased his brow, and for a long time he sat staring, now at the photograph, and again at the pouch of dust beside the guttered candle on the floor of the tent. What was it the prospector had said—that Bill was doing well—was located on the only good bend of a crick over in the foot hills. Gosh! Suppose Bill had struck some of those five thousand dollar pockets, himself! Or even ten thousand! It was more than a month since the man had seen him. Why—Bill might even have his hundred thousand right now, and be on the way to Seattle—to Mabel! The son of a gun might have sneaked back to Seattle without hunting him up to shoot it out with him!

Buck cached his pouch, blew out the candle, and slipped between his blankets—but, not to sleep. Visions of Bill tortured him—Bill with his hundred thousand in dust hurrying toward Seattle—Bill proudly plumping his hundred thousand dollar pouch down beside the wax flowers under the glass dome on the yellow oak table in the little parlor in Washington Street, while a yellow haired girl devoured him with her eyes of corn flower blue! Buck didn't stop to figure that even at mint valuation, the hundred thousand dollar pouch wouldn't take much plumping to carry wax flowers, glass dome, table and all down through the floor into the basement—even supposing Bill had succeeded in getting it into the parlor without the aid of a couple of piano movers. Buck's thoughts were on the girl—not on the weight of gold.

At two o'clock in the morning, rifle in hand, and pockets full of cartridges, Buck was on the trail. The prospector had described the creek, and Buck had no doubt of his ability to find it. On and on he went, threading valleys, crossing ridges. Now and then he paused for a practice shot at a woodpecker or a sandpiper. He didn't hit any of them, and when the gun was empty he refilled the magazine, contented in the thought that Bill hardly ever hit anything, either—and besides, Bill was much larger than woodpeckers and sandpipers—snipes, Buck called them. Later in the morning he ate a lunch, and again at noon. It was well toward mid-afternoon when, topping a ridge, he caught sight of Bill's tent on the edge of a spruce copse on a horseshoe bend of a creek. He recognized the layout from the prospector's description.

Descending the ridge, he called loudly, but got no response. Again and again he called. Surely anyone on the bend could have heard those shouts! Maybe Bill was off in the hills after meat. Maybe—Buck's heart seemed to stop beating, and there was a peculiar sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. Maybe Bill had got his hundred thousand and hit for Seattle without even waiting to pull down his tent!

Gripping his rifle, Buck hastened to the tent and pulled back the flap. No—there was Bill's stuff, and over in the corner his blankets. The pile of blankets moved slightly, and a low moan reached Buck's ears. The next moment he was on his knees beside the mounded bedding.

"What's the matter, Bill? Listen—it's Buck! What's happened?"

"Water! I'm burning up! Give me some water!" The words came thickly, as though with an effort.

Catching up a pail, Buck dashed to the creek, and a few moments later was holding a tin cup full of water to the swollen lips as he supported Bill's head on his arm. "What the hell ails you?" he persisted, as Bill sucked the water from the cup in great gulps.

"I'm sick—more water, for God's sake! Caught it from some Siwashes, I guess—they were here—couple weeks ago—all broke out——"

"Yeah!" cried Buck, staring down into the blotched and pustuled face which he could see plainly now that his eyes had accustomed themselves to the dim interior. "And you're all broke out, too! It's small pox, or measles, or something—and boy, have you got it!"

"My head aches, and my back, and I'm burning up—and I itch all over. Go 'way, or you'll get it, too!"

"If I'm going to get it, I've got it by now," replied Buck, philosophically. "Anyhow, I've had the measles, and I've been vaccinated—so I'm not afraid."

"But—if we both die, what will Mabel do?"

"Do without us, you damn fool! I'm not going to die. You might—but it won't be much loss. I was going to shoot you anyway—if I could hit you."

"I can't shoot very good, either," mumbled Bill. "But I've got a lot of shells. Wait till I rest a minute, and we'll get it over with."

"You're in no shape to fight a duel!" cried Buck. "I won't fight a man that's half dead. You'll probably die anyway, so there wouldn't be any use. When did you eat last?"

"I don't know. I'm not hungry. Give me some more water!"

"You can't have any more—not right now. It would probably kill you."

"How do you know?"

"It stands to reason. Listen—I've been sick, and I know enough about sickness to know that the doctors are always holding out on you when you're sick. If you want something real bad, you can't have it—it might kill you. So you don't get any more water."

"I'm burning up!" moaned the invalid.

"I'll cook you some soup."

"I don't want any soup!"

"That's what you'll get, then. Doctors always give you what you don't want. Besides, it stands to reason you'll die if you don't eat."

"I feel like hell. I wish I was dead right now!"

"So do I—but I can't let you die, if I can help it. It wouldn't be humane. Life's kind of funny, isn't it? I wish you were dead—but I've got to do everything I can to make you live. And if you do live, I've got to shoot you, anyway. I've got Mabel's future to think about."

"You don't need to wory about Mabel's future," mumbled the sick man. "I'll look out for that. As quick as I get well and quit itching so I can hold my gun still, I'm going to shoot you dead at twenty paces! I killed a moose the other day."

"Anyone could hit a moose. I've been practicing on snipes."

"How many did you kill?"

"I scairt a lot of 'em. And besides, you're a lot bigger than a snipe."

"But I don't scare so easy as one. Give me some water!"

"Here's a little bit. And now I'll put on the soup. I've got to get you well. I think this is small pox you've got, and even if you should get well, you'll probably be all pitted up till Mabel nor no other girl would care to look at you. So you don't need to feel bad when I shoot you."

"Is that so? Well, you're no chromo, yourself—with those freckles all over your face! You look like you'd stood too close and got spattered with something! I guess a few pits would be restful to Mabel's eyes—after having to look at you for two nights a week like she did, if you didn't lie about it."

FOR two weeks Buck nursed Bill through a rather severe case of small pox. Then one morning he took his departure.

"You're pretty weak yet, Bill—and not in any shape to fight a duel. But you'll come along all right. Here's a map that'll show you how to get to my place. Eat a lot, and get strong as quick as you can. I can't waste any more time here. I've got to get back to my digging. A week or so ought to put you in shape. But don't wait any longer than you have to—or you won't find me there. You'll have to look me up on Washington Street—back in Seattle. I'm taking out five thousand dollars a day, where I am——"

"You're taking out *what!*"

"Yeah—five thousand a day."

"For how long?" cried Bill, staring at the other, wide-eyed.

"For a day—but I know how to go at it now. The rest is easy. I found it behind a rock, and there's lots of rocks in my rapids. I figure I'll have my hundred thousand in seventeen or eighteen days."

"I'll be there in a week or ten days!" cried Bill. "And with what we've both got saved up, maybe I'll have pretty near enough."

Buck grinned. "Bring your dust along, Bill. It'll save me coming clear back here after it. So long. I'll be seeing you."

III

BILL'S recuperation was rapid. For the first few days after Buck's departure work with the shovel and pan tired him quickly. But he ate ravenously, and spent long hours dozing beside the creek in the warm sunshine. He weighed up his dust, and computed that it would take him at least nine more years to lay by his hundred thousand dollars. Nine years—and Buck was taking out five thousand a day! In less than a month Buck would have his hundred thousand, and be off for Seattle—and Mabel! It wasn't right! Mabel could never care for Buck, anyway! Buck was a good guy—but he was no husband for a girl like Mabel! Bill took a photograph from his pocket and regarded it long and lovingly. It depicted a simpering blonde stiffly posed beside what appeared to be a massive marble balcony. He turned it over and read the inscription. "To Bill dear, with love from Mabel."

"Buck's a fool," he muttered aloud. "Anyone that could write a wonderful sentiment like that, couldn't ever care for anyone else!"

Still, if Buck were to show up in Seattle with a hundred thousand—— And by Gosh, Buck might do just that! If he was taking out five thousand a day—he might even take out ten thousand, if his luck broke right—that would only be ten days!

That evening, the seventh after Buck's departure, Bill drew Buck's map from his pocket and studied it. At daylight next morning he filled his pockets with cartridges, and struck out to the westward.

THE June days are long in the sub Arctic and Bill took his time, pausing for frequent rests, during which he gnawed at chunks of cold meat, and planned his future with Mabel. He was packing his dust with him. The rest of his outfit he had left in the tent. He wouldn't be needing it any longer. He'd bury Buck under a patch of blue flowers like he promised, and then with Buck's pack sack and blankets, and all the dust, he'd go to Dawson and on to Seattle.

The sun had dipped behind the high hills when he came out into a valley that he recognized by the three red rock pinnacles indicated on Buck's map. He produced the map and checked his position. Buck's camp would be a mile upstream from here, at the mouth of a dry gulch that came in from the west.

Heading upstream, he threaded a scattering of spruce timber, holding close to the rim wall to avoid the marshy ground. Twilight was deepening. He smelled smoke and quickened his steps, realizing that he was hungry and a bit tired. Maybe

they had better have supper before they fought the duel. A fellow probably couldn't shoot very good on an empty stomach. It would probably be better to put off the duel till morning. It would be too dark to see the sights distinctly by the time supper was over. Anyway, it would give them a chance to talk over old times —when they were partners, before either one knew that the other knew Mabel. Besides, he dimly remembered to have read somewhere that duels were fought early in the morning. He would invest all the dust in bank stock, and they'd probably make him a vice president or a director—or at least cashier.

The smell of smoke grew stronger. Bill halted abruptly and listened. Yes—there it was again—the sound of voices. That was funny Buck hadn't said anything about having neighbors. It was a good thing, though. Now they could have seconds—and no one could say that the duel wasn't all fair and regular.

Hastening forward, he came to a sudden stop at the edge of the timber, and the next instant slipped hurriedly behind a bushy young spruce tree, through the branches of which he stared in wide-eyed surprise. Two men squatted at a fire beside the creek, while a third lay bound hand and foot upon the gravel close by. The bound man was Buck! Even as Bill looked, one of the men reached out and drew what looked like an iron rod from the fire. In the gathering darkness Bill saw that it glowed red for half its length.

"Put 'er back," ordered the other, a bushy bearded man with a coarse voice. "She ain't hot 'nuff yet." He turned to Buck with a rasping laugh. "When you feel the hot iron bitin' into yer feet, you'll tell wher' yer cache is. When you git a whiff of the meat cookin'—yer own meat —you'll squawk, all right."

The whole horrid situation burst upon Bill in a flash. These men were robbers! They were about to torture Buck to make him tell where his cache was! He could see, now, that Buck's feet were bare. They had rolled his trousers almost to his knees. Buck was a good guy! He didn't deserve to have his feet burnt with a hot iron—even if he did think that Mabel was in love with him!

THE man was reaching for the iron again. Red rage surged into Bill's heart, and hardly realizing what he did, he thrust his rifle between the branches, squinted along the barrel, and began to pull the trigger and work the lever for all he was worth. Wild yells sounded from the fireside—yells and shrieks and a blur of motion. With tense, set lips Bill pumped and pulled his trigger as the little valley reverberated to the roar of the rifle, mingled with the cries from the fireside. Vaguely Bill was conscious of a volcano of sparks and fire brands—of two blurred forms dashing across the flat toward the

shelter of the timber along the opposite wall—of a bound figure writhing and shrieking, and flopping about on the gravel like a freshly landed fish. Then—with bewildering suddenness—came silence. A silence punctuated by the metallic clank of his rifle lever and the tiny click of the firing pin as he continued to frantically pump his empty gun. The voice of Buck brought him to his senses. "Help! Help! Hurry up, or I'll drown!"

Peering around his tree, Bill saw that Buck had flopped into the creek, and was holding his head above the surface of the shallow rapid, whose curling whitewater every few moments completely submerged it. There was no sign of the other two men. Without waiting to reload, Bill

dashed to the creek, twisted his fingers into Buck's collar, and pulled him out onto the sand.

"What in hell did you roll in the crick for?" he asked.

Buck retched and belched a mouthful of water onto the sand. "Cripes! I was burning up! What the hell did you shoot at the fire for? You threw hot coals all over me! They got down inside my shirt and pants where they jerked the buttons off when they tied me up. And besides, your bullets were hitting all around me—kicking up spurts of sand and gravel that stung like hell!"

"I wonder if I killed 'em?" speculated Bill, ignoring the tirade, and glancing over the flat.

"They didn't look very dead the last I saw of 'em," retorted Buck. "You damn near killed me, though!"

"Well," answered Bill complacently, "that's what I came here to do. I'm glad I didn't do it that way, though. You didn't have a real sporting chance. I'll cut you loose now—and we'll cook us some supper. The duel will have to wait till morning. It's too dark to shoot straight. I'd better load up, though. They might come back."

"I don't think they will," opined Buck. "They're a hell of a ways off by now, if they kept up the lick they started. You shot so damn fast, they probably thought there was a lot of you."

"That proves that shooting is like anything else—quantity is more effective, in the long run, than quality. I brought along a lot of shells."

"I've got three, four boxes, myself," said Buck, rising and stretching his arms and legs. "One of us ought to accomplish something. Ouch! My belly burns in three or four places—and one hip—where a coal got down my pants!"

"Put some soda on it. They'd have burnt your feet worse than that."

"Where's your blankets?" asked Buck, when supper was over.

"I didn't bring 'em," answered Bill. "I knew I wouldn't need 'em any more. I'll be using yours from now on."

"You won't be needing 'em any more?" answered Buck dryly. "But I'll be using my own blankets. Mabel can wash 'em out and we can have 'em for the spare room. There's that patch of yellow flowers you wanted—see—just across the creek. The ground don't dig hard, either. It's kind of mushy."

"You mean those yellow flowers there beside that patch of blue ones?" asked Bill, peering through the gloom. "When Mabel washes up those blankets, we'll use 'em on our own bed. It'll kind of remind me of—the Yukon."

"There's a new stampede," said Buck, "on a crick they call Portage. A fellow struck it lucky there, and the stampede's just started."

"How do you know?"

"Those fellows were talking about it while they were heating up that gun barrel to burn my feet with. They figured on getting in on it after they left here."

"They wouldn't be telling you where they were going," said Bill.

"It wouldn't make any difference. They were going to torture me till I told 'em where my cache was, and then they were going to knock me off, and beat it for the stampede. They were tough guys."

"Have you got your hundred thousand, yet?" Bill asked abruptly.

"No. I haven't been doing much good. That rock I struck it lucky behind was the only rock in the whole rapids that had any gold by it. I snagged my boots, and I've damn near froze sloshing around in the cold water."

"After we fight our duel tomorrow," announced Bill, "I'm going to take what dust you had, and mine, and hit out for that stampede. Where's this Portage Crick at?"

"It's not so far from Dawson—according to those fellows. But—hell—Bill! We can't fight any duel tomorrow! I just happened to think!"

"Think about what?"

"My rifle—they smashed the stock off of it and threw it in the fire—and it was the barrel they were heating to burn my feet with! We're right back where we were this spring—only one rifle to fight a duel with!"

"Why didn't you make 'em use their own rifle!" cried the exasperated Bill. "We'll never get this duel fought—at the rate we're going! You dragged me clear down here on false pretenses, and——"

"I'll tell you what we'll do," cut in Buck. "We'll both get in on that Portage stampede! Then when we locate our claims, I'll slip down to Dawson and get a new rifle, and we can fight our duel any day we like."

"How can I get in on the stampede—with my outfit clear back there on my crick? All the good claims'll be taken before I could get there."

"Leave your stuff where it is. I'll divide mine with you. We can hit out together in the morning—and after we get located, we can buy more stuff. Come on—let's roll in and get us some sleep. You slip in bed first, and get over by the wall. I'll take the outside, so if my belly gets to burning in the night, I can get up and put some more soda on it. We might strike it lucky as hell—down there on Portage!"

IV

FINDING the lower reaches of Portage staked, the two located claims farther up the creek, and within a half mile of each other. Bill managed to buy an old tent and an outfit from a man who had thrown in with another, and for three weeks he and Buck worked their respective claims frantically in the hope of making a strike.

Then one evening Buck showed up at Bill's camp.

"Did you get a rifle yet?" asked Bill, reaching for his own.

"No, I haven't been to Dawson. But we've got to go, now."

"Why? I'm busy taking out gold. I panned fourteen dollars today out of the top gravel."

"Yeah—but we're liable to lose all we've got. I saw those two damn cusses today that were going to burn my feet. I'm going down and bank my dust in the Tivoli safe, like the sourdoughs do, and get a receipt for it. Then they can't torture it out of us."

"Report 'em to the police," advised Bill.

"I couldn't prove anything. They'd say I lied. And you never got a good look at 'em."

"That's right. I'd sure hate to lose my dust. You stay here with me tonight. I got a canoe along with the tent and outfit, and we'll hit out in the morning. We can make it quicker by water. You can get a rifle while you're down there, and we can fight out the duel when we get back."

"Sure," agreed Buck, "and we'll get those receipts made out so the one of us that's left gets all the dust."

"That's right. There's a nice patch of blue flowers just a little ways up the crick."

"There's a patch of yellow ones quite close to my tent," replied Buck. "I've got a place scooped out right in the middle of 'em."

In Dawson Buck stopped at the A. C. store to purchase a rifle, and Bill went on to the Tivoli, where a bullet-headed young man, evidently a bit the worse for liquor, was loudly proclaiming to all and sundry that "money talks!"

"Who's he?" asked Bill of Moosehide Charlie, one of the sourdoughs.

Moosehide shrugged. "Search me. Jest another damn chechako with more money than brains. He's been around here three, four weeks offerin' to buy claims. The boys have nicknamed him Money Talks, an' they salted a couple of bum claims on him—but so far, he's be'n a little too sharp fer 'em. Someone'll git him, though. It's only a question of time."

"Maybe he hasn't got any money," suggested Bill. "Maybe it's all just talk."

"No—he's got the dough all right. He's

fixed it up with Curley, here—certified check, or bonds, or somethin', so Curley'll pay up to two hundred thousan' in dust on his order."

"Money talks," vociferated the tipsy one. "Let the other fellow do the digging! I'll put my money to work for me! Money talks, boys! Money talks in any language!"

Bill deposited his dust with Curley, the proprietor of the Tivoli, and took his receipt. The loud mouthed one eyed the transaction, sidled up to Bill, and ordered the drinks.

"Where's your claim, brother?" he asked.

"Portage Crick," answered Bill, filling his glass.

"Portage Crick! Why, that's a new stampede! How long you been in there?"

"About three weeks," answered Bill.

"Will you sell?"

"Why—sure. If I get my price."

For answer the man peeled a hundred dollar bill from a roll he drew from his pocket and tendered it. "Take this for a ten day option. Take it—you don't have to sell—all I want is your word that you won't sell out to anyone else for ten days. I'll be up and look the claim over before then. Whether I buy or not, the hundred's yours."

"Thanks," said Bill, pocketing the note. "It's a deal."

A SHORT time later, Buck stepped into the Tivoli, and, saying nothing of his transaction, Bill slipped out to purchase some supplies at the store.

When he deposited his dust Buck, too, was accosted by the blatant one, who was still loudly insisting that money talks. And he, too, accepted a hundred dollar bill in return for his promise not to sell his claim for ten days.

Back on Portage, the two beached the canoe at Bill's camp, unloaded his supplies, and after he had procured his rifle and all the cartridges he could find, they pushed on up to Buck's camp near the headwaters.

"We'll eat first," said Buck, "and then we can get along with the duel."

"Sure," agreed Bill. "Twenty paces—and keep on shooting till one of us drops."

"That's a peach of a new rifle I got, Bill," said Buck. "It's got a flat trajectory——"

"What's a trajectory?"

"Why—it's—damn if I know. But anyway, the one it's got is flat."

"What good does that do?"

"Why—search me. The man said it's got a muzzle velocity of twenty-eight hundred feet a second, and it'll hold up fer——"

"How long would that take the bullet to go twenty paces?" speculated the mathematical Bill. "I'll figure it out when we get to camp."

"What difference does it make?"

"Well—hell—a man likes to know about how much time he's got after you pull the trigger."

"It wouldn't be long," opined Buck. "The man said the sights——"

"Any rifle's got sights," interrupted Bill testily. "You're just trying to get my goat, bragging up your new rifle! I don't give a damn if it shoots a million feet a second, and if its trajectory is flat or round or square! My rifle has hit things up to the size of a moose——"

"It ain't how big a thing it has hit—it's how little that counts," reminded Buck. "I know it can scatter a campfire all over hell. But I never saw it kill many men."

"It was dark, and they were running and besides they were more than twenty

paces away," defended Bill. "I'll do better next time—but you'll never know it."

"Did you speak to Curley about me getting your dust?" asked Buck.

"I mentioned that I'd be collecting yours," retorted Bill. "He said that was okay, because he knew we were pardners. I let it go at that. It was easier than explaining—about the duel and all."

"Yeah," agreed Buck. "I let it ride that way, too. How about fighting our duel first, and eating afterward?"

"That will save a little grub," said Bill. "There'll only be one of us to eat it. Go get your shells."

Buck disappeared into his tent and came out with several boxes of ammunition which he transferred to his pockets. Solemnly they paced off twenty paces. Each took his stand, and Buck reached for a handful of cartridges and began working at his rifle.

"Hey—hold on!" he cried.

"What's the matter?" asked Bill. "Don't you know how to load it?"

"Sure, I do—but these damn shells don't fit!"

Laying down his rifle, Bill strode over and regarded the rifle and the shells. "How in hell do you expect 'em to—when they're 30-40 shells and this is a .303 rifle? Didn't you get any shells for it in Dawson?"

"No—of course not! I had plenty of of shells."

"A lot of good they'll do you," growled Bill. "Come on. Let's eat. That damn duel will have to wait. It looks like we'd never get it fought."

TOGETHER the two pitched in and prepared supper.

"There was a mouthy guy in the Tivoli hollering around that money talks," commented Bill, a piece of moose meat poised on his fork.

"Yeah. He acted kind of drunk. The sourdoughs don't like him much. They call him Money Talks. That's what he's always saying."

"I don't blame the sourdoughs," remarked Bill, slanting the other a glance. "Did you like him?"

"No," Buck replied, studying the other beneath his hat brim. "He shoots off his mouth too much."

"It seems like I've seen him somewheres, before."

"Yeah, it kind of seemed to me that way, too. But it isn't likely."

"No. They say he's got a lot of dough. They salted a couple of claims on him—but he didn't bite."

"He figures on buying claims and hiring men to work 'em."

"Someone will take him. They say he's got a couple of hundred thousand in Curley's safe."

"Yeah, that's what they say. I'm sorry about those shells, Bill. I never thought about their not fitting."

"Oh, that's all right, Buck. A man can't think of everything. Someone will be going down before the summer's over."

"Well, so long. I'll be getting back to camp. I'm going to work like hell to get that hundred thousand."

"Yeah—me too. So long, Bill. I probably won't be seeing you in quite a while."

V

ONE day, a week later, Bill looked up from his pan to see the man called Money Talks striding toward him.

"I've come to look over the claim," he announced without the formality of a greeting.

"Help yourself," invited Bill, laying aside his pan. "I'll show you around."

It took only a few minutes to go over the claim while Bill pointed out the dozen or more shallow prospect holes he had scooped out.

"Do you mean you haven't sunk any shaft?" asked the man.

"No—just these holes. I've only been here three weeks."

"Hum. What do you hold the claim at?"

"A hundred thousand," announced Bill, striving to make his voice sound casual.

"A hundred thousand! That's a hell of a lot of money!"

Bill shrugged. "It might be—to some folks," he answered, indifferently. "You can take it—or leave it. That's my figure. I've got a chance to——"

"You haven't got a chance to do anything but sell this claim to me!" interrupted the man. "I took an option on it—and I'm here to close the deal. Money talks—and I've got the money! This is a new crick. Nobody's got very far down with a shaft yet. But they're taking out dust. You sign this transfer—and here's an order on Curley for your hundred thousand. Like I said, a hundred thousand is a hell of a lot of money—but money talks, and I'm not afraid to spend money to make money! Put your John Hancock right there on that line—here's the pen."

In a daze, Bill signed his name to the transfer, stared at the order on Curley that called for a hundred thousand dollars in dust that the other had thrust into his hand, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

"I'm no fool!" the man was saying. "I was there when you deposited your dust in the Tivoli. I know how much you banked. It figures up right around four thousand a week, for the three weeks you've been here. Twenty-five weeks and I'll have my money back—and I won't hardly be out of the grass roots. Money talks, young fella! It takes money to make money!"

"But—I—I didn't take that dust——"

The other cut him short. "It don't make a damn bit of difference whether you've taken the dust out of Curley's safe or not! You accepted the order for it—and the deal's closed!"

"But I didn't mean——"

"I don't give a damn what you mean! The claim's mine. The hundred thousand in dust is yours—and that's all there is to it! I'll admit that the option wasn't probably all according to Hoyle—should have been in writing—and all that. But up here men are making verbal deals every day. If you hadn't transferred that claim, on my tender of your price, after accepting that hundred dollars in the Tivoli, they'd have run you out of the Yukon."

"They won't have to run me out," retorted Bill dryly. "I'll be hitting out myself in the morning."

BILL hardly knew when the man left. His knees felt weak and shaky, and sinking down onto the gravel beside his pan, he drew the order from his pocket and stared at it with unbelieving eyes.

"Portage Creek, August 3rd.

"To Curley, proprietor of Tivoli Saloon, Dawson, Y. T. Pay to the order of Wm. Strang, one hundred thousand dollars ($100,000) in gold on demand.

"J. P. Whipple."

"A hundred thousand dollars," he murmured, in an awed tone, his brain groping to realize the enormousness of the sum. And more than twelve thousand besides in the Tivoli safe! And now he'd go back! Back to Seattle—and to Mabel! He had made his hundred thousand in just a little more than a year. He was a money man now—a financier. "I tried to tell him," he muttered, "that I didn't take that dust out of this claim. But he wouldn't listen. Money Talks—that's a good name for him. He sure talked himself out of a hundred thousand. He might get it back, at that—but not in any twenty-five weeks!"

His thoughts turned to Buck. Good old Buck. Buck would go on digging away at his claim—but with no chance to take a hundred thousand dollars out of it for years and years to come. And by that time he and Mabel would have kids in school. He was glad, now, that they hadn't fought their duel. It would have been too bad to kill Buck. Buck was a good guy—he'd find some other girl, maybe. Not one like Mabel, of course—

there weren't any more like her. Maybe Buck would marry a squaw.

It may have been an hour, or two hours later that a sound drew his attention to the creek. A canoe was passing, headed downstream. The man in the canoe was Money Talks. He didn't stop. Probably going back for his camp outfit. Or maybe back to Dawson.

Bill sat suddenly erect, frowning. What had Money Talks been doing up the creek? He hadn't noticed which way the man went when he left the claim. He had been too dazed to notice anything. Buck's camp was up the creek. Had he gone up to Buck's camp? But—why would he go there? Maybe he'd told Buck about buying the claim! If he had, Buck would be coming hell-bent down to fight that duel—even if he had to borrow a rifle to do it! Bill remembered with a sudden chill that they had agreed that the victor should take the dust of each—and Mabel! And now he had the hundred thousand that Mabel had demanded—and Buck might get it! He shuddered slightly, as he thought of that patch of yellow flowers up near Buck's camp—with the hole scooped out of the middle of it. Suddenly Bill realized that he didn't want to fight a duel. It wasn't right, anyway. There was a law against it!

And why was Money Talks going back down the creek after having gone up? Maybe he'd decided to buy Buck's claim instead of his—and was heading back to Dawson to stop payment on that order. He could draw all his gold out of Curley's safe—and there wouldn't be any dust to pay the order with!

BILL leaped to his feet. "No matter how you look at it, I've got to hit for Dawson!" he cried. "If I don't beat Money Talks to the Tivoli, I'll probably lose that hundred thousand—and if Buck comes down here, he'll make me fight that duel!"

Ten minutes later, with his blankets and such of his outfit as he could scoop together in a couple of wild grabs, he was in his canoe headed down the Portage.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, as his frail craft shot out into the wide water at the foot of a turbulent rapid, his eye caught an object spinning slowly around in an eddy. It was a canoe floating bottom upward, and as it swung close, Bill saw a gaping hole in its side. Disaster had overtaken someone in the rapid! But who? When?

Even as he asked these questions, his glance came to rest on a figure that lay, partly on the coarse gravel, but mostly in the water, where the eddy had evidently deposited it. It was a gruesome figure—the drowned body of a man. A few swift strokes of his paddle, and Bill beached the canoe, leaped out, and seizing the sodden form, drew it clear of the water. A low cry escaped him. The man was Money Talks! Dropping to his knees,

Bill slipped a hand beneath his open shirt. There was a slight flutter of the heart. The man was alive! But he was nearly drowned—and Bill sensed he must do something—and that something soon. Instantly a thought occurred to him—something he had read years ago about first aid to drowned people. He remembered, of course, the old trick of rolling them over a barrel to rid the lungs of water. But, unfortunately, especially in the outlands, few people drown in the vicinity of barrels. This other trick was better—it consisted in grasping the drowned one firmly by the ankles, bringing his knees up over the shoulders, so that his body hangs head

downward against one's back, and then trotting roughly up and down as the water is jolted from the victim's lungs. Instantly Bill acted, and a moment later was staggering up and down the narrow strip of shingle as water gushed out of the unconscious man's open mouth. Bill had made two turns of his limited stretch of beach, when a loud shout brought him to an abrupt halt.

"Hey, there! What the hell you doing?"

Releasing his hold on the ankles Bill spun around as the man plopped onto the gravel. There, shooting across the pool at the foot of the rapids, came a canoe! A moment later Buck stood on the gravel beside him and stared down at the inanimate form.

"What the hell!" he cried, staring down in horror. "What did you kill him for?"

"Kill him—hell! He drowned—and I'm bringing him to! There's his canoe—out there in the eddy. He must have smashed up in the rapids. We've got to work fast, or he'll die! Here—I read it in a book—get to work!" As Bill talked, he reached down and flopped the man onto his back. "Here, you hold his tongue out, so it don't slip down his throat and choke him to death, and I'll work his arms, and press his ribs!"

"His tongue's too slippery!" cried Buck. "I can't hang onto it!"

Pausing for a moment in his working of the man's arms, Bill drew a fishing line from his pocket. "Here, jab that hook through his tongue and you can hold it! Pull the tongue way out, and snub the line to his shirt button—and then you can help me. That's the stuff! Press down on his ribs now, and let up on 'em quick, while I work his arms up and down. He ought to begin breathing pretty quick, according to that book."

"I don't know," said Buck doubtfully, eyeing the back of the man's head, which had turned to one side. "The way you were dragging his head over those rocks, you might as well let him drown."

"That's the way the book said to do it," defended Bill.

"Yeah—but he's so much taller than you that his head banged along the rocks when you trotted up and down. Maybe it didn't bust, though! Look there—he's breathing by himself, now!"

"I'll keep working his arms a while," said Bill. "Go and get that flask out of my duffel bag—I've got some whiskey in it for emergencies."

BUCK produced the flask, and unscrewing the cap, started to hold it to the man's lips, when he looked up with sudden concern. "Hey," he cried. "A man can't drink with a fish hook through his tongue! And I can't get it out! When he comes to, it'll hurt like hell!"

"It's better'n being dead," said Bill, pausing in his pumping, to scratch his head in perplexity. "I've got it," he cried. "Shove the point on through, and I'll file the barb off. I've got a file here on my knife. He's breathing pretty good, now. Maybe he'll live."

As Bill filed, Buck regarded him with furrowed brow. "What the hell were you doing down here in the first place?" he asked.

"Who—me? I was heading for Dawson. What are you doing here?"

"I was heading for Dawson, too," replied Buck. "I sold my claim."

"Sold your claim! Who to?"

"Him," answered Buck, pointing to the unconscious man.

"For how much?"

"A hundred thousand dollars. I've got the order on Curley in my pocket."

"That's what he gave me for mine," announced Bill. "I've got an order, too. An' now we've *got* to fight that duel."

"Yeah—we'll fight it when we get to Dawson. I'll pour a little whiskey down him, now."

The raw liquor caused the man to cough feebly. Presently his eyelids fluttered, and opened. Buck administered more liquor,

and the man managed to swallow a quantity of it.

"I—feel—like—hell," he muttered feebly, his eyes rolling upon the two without hint of recognition.

"I don't think you'll die," said Buck. "We'll get you to Dawson."

"I'm going—to die," the man murmured. "I'm all smashed up. My head hurts—my tongue. Take wallet—in my pocket—send it to my wife—claim papers—two claims——" The voice trailed into silence.

"Where does she live?" asked Buck, shaking him roughly.

The man seemed fighting for consciousness. "Seattle—her address—on picture——"

He relapsed into unconsciousness, and Bill drew a soggy wallet from the man's pocket. Opening it, he withdrew an envelope of oiled silk which had effectually kept the water from its contents. From the envelope he extracted the two claim transfers, and a photograph. The next instant both he and Buck gave vent to sharp exclamations of surprise, as they stared, wide eyed at the picture. It was a cheap photograph of a blonde. She was standing stiffly beside what purported to be a massive marble balcony. Bill turned it over. On the back was written in a familiar scrawl. "To Jim dear, with love from Mabel." Below was pencilled an address—Mrs. J. P. Whipple, 1000 Harlow Avenue, Seattle, Wash.

"Well—I'll be damned!" Buck gasped. "It's—it's Mabel!"

"Yeah," agreed Bill, dully. "It's her, all right."

"And—she's his wife!"

"It looks that way. I knew damn well I'd seen that fellow before. He's old man Whipple's son—the lumberman! I've seen him driving around in a red wheeled rig, with rubber tires——"

"And a black horse—and white harness," added Buck. "I remember! And she was old man Whipple's office girl."

"She's his daughter-in-law, now."

"Yeah," admitted Buck, and drawing a photograph from his pocket, he laid it beside the other.

BILL produced his photo, and the two squatted and stared at the three identical pictures simpering up at them from the gravel. "She wrote the same damn thing on all of 'em," he said in disgust. "Only she changed the names."

"All she wanted was money," stated Buck, with bitter conviction. "She didn't love either one of us."

"I guess you're right," assented Bill ruefully. "And just think—we've been working like hell to get all that money—for a girl like her!"

"And jeopardizing each other's lives, to boot," added Buck. "God—I'm glad we didn't fight that duel!"

"You and me—both! What'll we do with him?" Bill indicated the unconscious man with disfavor. "Leave him here?"

"No. We'd better take him down to the hospital. We've got the dough. We ought to leave Mabel something."

"I guess that's right. Then we'll cash these orders, and redeposit the dust in our own names," replied Bill, the banker. "We'll stick his wallet back in his pocket. I don't believe he's going to die."

"Not by a damn sight!" cried Buck. "He told us to send it to her—and send it we will! We'll just put these pictures she gave us in with his—for good measure. Our names are on those transfers—she'll know it's us—and these pictures will cinch it. Telling you about me—I want her to know that I made my hundred thousand!"

"Me, too!" cried Bill. "And boy—it'll burn her up when she finds out how we made it. What'll we do, Buck? Are you going back to Seattle?"

"Not me. Not after a deal like that. Let's throw in pardners again—and go hunt us up a new crick."

"Suits me," agreed Bill. "Let's go!"

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